

MAKERS AND MONGERS

Inside the minds (and rinds) of the cheese world's brightest

Mike Matucheski: A legacy of curiosity, innovation and mentorship in cheesemaking

By Christina Paschen

ANTIGO, Wis. — For Mike Matucheski, cheesemaking never has been simply a job. It is a lifelong exercise in curiosity — understanding why cheese behaves the way it does, questioning long-standing processes and looking for ways to make something good even better.

“It’s not just cheese. It’s my life,” Matucheski says. “As I approach it, you need to sweat the small details, all the time.”

That philosophy has taken Matucheski from a cheesemaker’s helper at Kraft’s Antigo, Wisconsin, plant in 1993 to a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker who played a significant role in developing Sartori’s retail cheese program. Along the way, he helped refine cheeses and developed flavored cheeses that established Sartori’s presence in the specialty cheese market. He also mentored fellow cheesemakers, including Erin Radtke, who would go on to become a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker herself.

Although Matucheski retired from Sartori in September 2020, he hasn’t left cheesemaking behind. Today, he works with the Center for Dairy

Research in Madison, Wisconsin, where he mentors students and works with dairy businesses on troubleshooting, product development and other efforts to add value to milk.

For Matucheski, it is another opportunity to keep learning — and to help others do the same.

• **Finding the mystery in cheesemaking**

Matucheski studied history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and initially imagined a career involving journalism, archaeology or teaching. After returning to Antigo in 1982, he eventually found a job posting for a cheesemaker’s helper, also referred to as a hooper, at Kraft.

He wasn’t immediately interested. He had passed the Kraft plant during gym class and remembered the smell.

But the work itself quickly caught his attention.

As a hooper, Matucheski scooped curds from stainless steel vats into hoops, where they were pressed, brined and aged. He was captivated by the transformation, watching small pieces of curd come together under pressure, then change through brining and aging into a finished cheese.

The cheese made in the plant also



Photo courtesy of Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin

WISCONSIN MASTER CHEESEMAKERS — Mike Matucheski holds a wheel of cheese at Sartori’s production facility in Antigo, Wisconsin, with fellow Wisconsin Master Cheesemakers Mark Gustafson, left, and Larry Steckbauer, right. All three were part of the Sartori cheesemaking team, bringing their expertise to the company’s cheeses.

surprised him. It tasted nothing like the familiar Kraft Parmesan sold in shaker cans.

Matucheski began asking questions. At the time, the plant was highly segmented. The starter technician knew starters. The cheesemaker knew how to run the vats. Other employees knew their individual parts of the process. But few people had a complete picture of how everything worked together.

Matucheski wanted to understand that bigger picture.

That curiosity became a defining characteristic of his career.

• **Learning to question the process**

Matucheski started at Kraft in March 1993. Just weeks later, on May 4 — his birthday — employees learned that the plant would close.

Instead, the employees came together to buy the plant, using their pension funds to finance the purchase. For the next 13 years, the facility operated as Antigo Cheese Co., with employees working to recreate the cheese they previously had made for Kraft while developing their own processes and starters.

Matucheski moved into a second-shift cheesemaking role, which gave him an opportunity to work on product improvement. He began studying cheesemaking books on his own and

questioning why certain processes were being done the way they were.

One problem involved excess moisture in Parmesan. The traditional Kraft process cooked the curds very quickly at high temperatures, creating a hard shell that could trap moisture inside the cheese.

Matucheski began experimenting with changes to the cooking process, researching cheesemaking texts and working with the Center for Dairy Research to evaluate the results. The new approach improved moisture control and reduced variability.

It was a lesson that would follow him throughout his career: The goal wasn’t simply to fix a bad wheel after it was made; it was to understand why the problem happened in the first place.

That same mindset led him to tackle another persistent issue: cracked wheels of hard Italian cheese. Rather than simply hiding cracked wheels when customers visited, Matucheski pushed to understand what was causing them.

The eventual solution required changes to the cheesemaking process and ultimately a new plant designed around the process.

“Every problem is an opportunity,” Matucheski says.

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Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association

GRAND CHAMPION — Mike Matucheski holds Sartori’s Black Pepper BellaVitano, which he crafted as the company’s Master Cheesemaker. The cheese was named Grand Champion at the 2017 U.S. Championship Cheese Contest, earning a score of 99.02 out of 100 and taking the top honor among more than 2,300 entries.

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MATUCHESKI

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• The freedom to create

When Sartori purchased Antigo Cheese Co. in July, 2006, Matucheski stayed on, eventually becoming part of the company's R&D efforts while maintaining his supervisory responsibilities.

The move gave him something particularly valuable: creative latitude.

Sartori was building a retail business, and Matucheski became deeply involved in product improvement and new product development.

That work helped shape cheeses that would become closely associated with Sartori, including SarVecchio Parmesan and BellaVitano. In 2011, Matucheski became a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker, earning certification in Asiago and Parmesan. He became certified in Fontina and Romano in 2015, then BellaVitano and Pastorale Blend in 2018.

BellaVitano as it exists today grew out of a cheese that was a cousin of

“High quality and consistent products were always in the front of Mike’s mind.

He looked at our process every day to make sure we were striving to make the best cheese in the world.”

Erin Radtke

Montamoré. Matucheski saw an opportunity to transform it into a brined wheel and develop something distinctly its own.

His ideas didn't stop at traditional cheese.

At one point, he experimented with basil and rosemary on Asiago. Rosemary proved successful enough to become one of Sartori's early flavored-cheeses successes.

Then came raspberry.

After attending an American Cheese Society conference where he encountered beer-soaked cheeses, Matucheski began thinking about

how Wisconsin beer could work with cheese. That eventually led him to New Glarus Brewing Co. and its fruit beers.

The result was Raspberry BellaVitano.

In 2008, the cheese won recognition at the World Cheese Awards as the best new American cheese.

Awards helped bring attention to Sartori's growing retail business, but Matucheski says getting a new cheese from the development stage into regular production was often the harder part.

The same was true of Merlot BellaVitano. Matucheski developed the flavor using wine concentrate sourced from a small Wisconsin winery. What began as experimentation eventually became the best-selling BellaVitano variety.

• Teaching the why

When Matucheski began mentoring Radtke at Sartori in 2006, she was working in the wheel production department. Radtke remembers his creativity and willingness to explain the reasoning behind the process.

“He was very creative and innovative. He took the time to explain why we did things the way we did. This was very important to me to really understand the whys behind the process,” Radtke says.

That approach had a lasting effect on Radtke's own approach to cheesemaking. She says Matucheski taught her to keep learning and to look for innovative ways to make cheese.

As Matucheski prepared for his eventual departure from Sartori, Radtke was selected to become his apprentice.

For Matucheski, choosing someone to take on that role was a significant decision. He needed to know that he could trust the person to make decisions when he wasn't there.

He chose Radtke.

Matucheski also wanted Radtke to develop the confidence to make decisions independently. There would be times, he told her, when she would need to tell him he was wrong or out of line.

Radtke remembers his emphasis on quality and consistency.

“High quality and consistent products were always in the front of Mike's mind. He looked at our process every day to make sure we were striving to make the best cheese in the world,” she says.

She also remembers collaborating



Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association

MASTERS OF THE CRAFT — Mike Matucheski stands with Erin Radtke at the April 2026 Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker awards ceremony. Matucheski mentored Radtke as she prepared to follow in his footsteps at Sartori. Radtke earned her Master Cheesemaker certification in Open-Class Hard Cheese and Parmesan.

with Matucheski to develop a new cheese, Pastorale Blend, a mixed-milk cheese made with cow's and sheep's milk and dusted with paprika. The cheese won Best of Class at the 2015 U.S. Championship Cheese Contest.

“We were super excited, but also we were worried if it won, we would only have the one vat of cheese to sell,” Radtke says.

Three years later, Pastorale Blend again won Best of Class at the 2018 World Championship Cheese Contest and placed among the contest's Top 20 cheeses overall.

For Matucheski, that combination of experimentation, uncertainty and excitement was part of what made cheesemaking so compelling.

• A legacy of curiosity

Radtke went on to become a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker herself, passing her exam in December 2025. Matucheski was there to present her ribbons.

She isn't the only person Matucheski

has influenced. During his career, he became known for his willingness to troubleshoot, experiment and share what he had learned.

That mindset continues in his work with the Center for Dairy Research, where Matucheski mentors students and works with dairy businesses, helping troubleshoot problems, explore new products and find ways to add value to milk. It is a natural extension of the role he has played throughout his career: understanding the process, asking questions and helping others find their own answers.

“The miracle of it all” is what still excites him about cheese, Matucheski says. “Start with milk and create an endless variety of things and to be able to work with people who carry that excitement.”

After more than three decades in the industry, Matucheski is still asking questions — and passing that curiosity on to the next generation of cheesemakers. **CMN**

Know a standout maker or monger?



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