

Fall/Winter 2021-22

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The story behind Whitewater's past and how the city became known as Second Salem

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SAY Cheese

A family dairy that began in the 1920s became known for cheese almost by accident

A day on the farm: This fall journey has a beautiful backdrop

A GUIDE TO JEFFERSON COUNTY AND SURROUNDING AREAS

How these Jefferson County cheesemakers captured something rare — from a smoked cheese spread to one of the state's top goudas



GETTING THE GOODS ON GOUDA ... AND SO MUCH MORE



By Craig Spychalla

There is one thing Michael Kraemer has learned over the years in the cheese business.

When you create a new flavor, someone needs to try it.

Walking past shelves filled with cheese spreads his family is known for, flavors like the popular cheddar and apricot honey are stacked high. There's even one spread that uses the hottest pepper in the world — the Carolina Reaper.

“Really the most interesting part of my job is working with flavors,” Kraemer said.

In a state known for producing some of the top cheese around the world, there is an art to creating each variety.

And for Kraemer, that includes 23 flavors of cheese spread with another half-dozen ready for tasting.

At Kraemer Wisconsin Cheese in Watertown, not only is the cheese shop attached to an old family barn, but the store is a product of generations of hard work and new ideas.

Cheese shops in Jefferson County offer a taste of some creative flavors to those who crave it — from tourists to cheese snobs.

But what makes these shops a fun day trip to the area is not only finding the right flavor for your next meal or glass of wine but uncovering the story behind the smoked gouda or how using the world's hottest pepper doesn't make it the hottest cheese.

“My dad and mom came up with most of the recipes,” Kraemer said of the spreads.

He has continued that tradition of trying new things, even blending pickles into one spread.

And using a local apricot honey blend is still a 3-to-1 best-seller for the shop over any other flavor.

If you try a smoked cheese spread at this shop, there is no additive. The cheese is smoked locally in



a meat shop's smoke house.

For Kraemer, coming up with that next idea is what his parents were about, he said. And what this family of cheese-makers has continued.

"That is what has kept us successful," he said.

What Kraemer loves about the industry is that cheese, in all its aged cheddar and curds glory, is an art when creating something new.

"You can get 50 cheeses that didn't exist 10 years ago," he said.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

On a Wednesday afternoon, Kraemer was about ready for

his 18th trip to Arkansas in the last year.

But this time he didn't have to bring cheese with him.

Last summer, Kraemer opened a second cheese shop location 900 miles from the family farmstead in Watertown by accident, kind of.

When his parents bought a retirement home in Hot Springs Village a decade ago, they soon found themselves having 2,000 neighbors from Wisconsin who liked the cheese they brought with them after visiting their family in Wisconsin. Soon, their vehicle was filled with 200 pounds of cheese to keep everyone happy.

"There was cheese stuffed everywhere," Kraemer said.

The new shop went up on five acres of land last summer,

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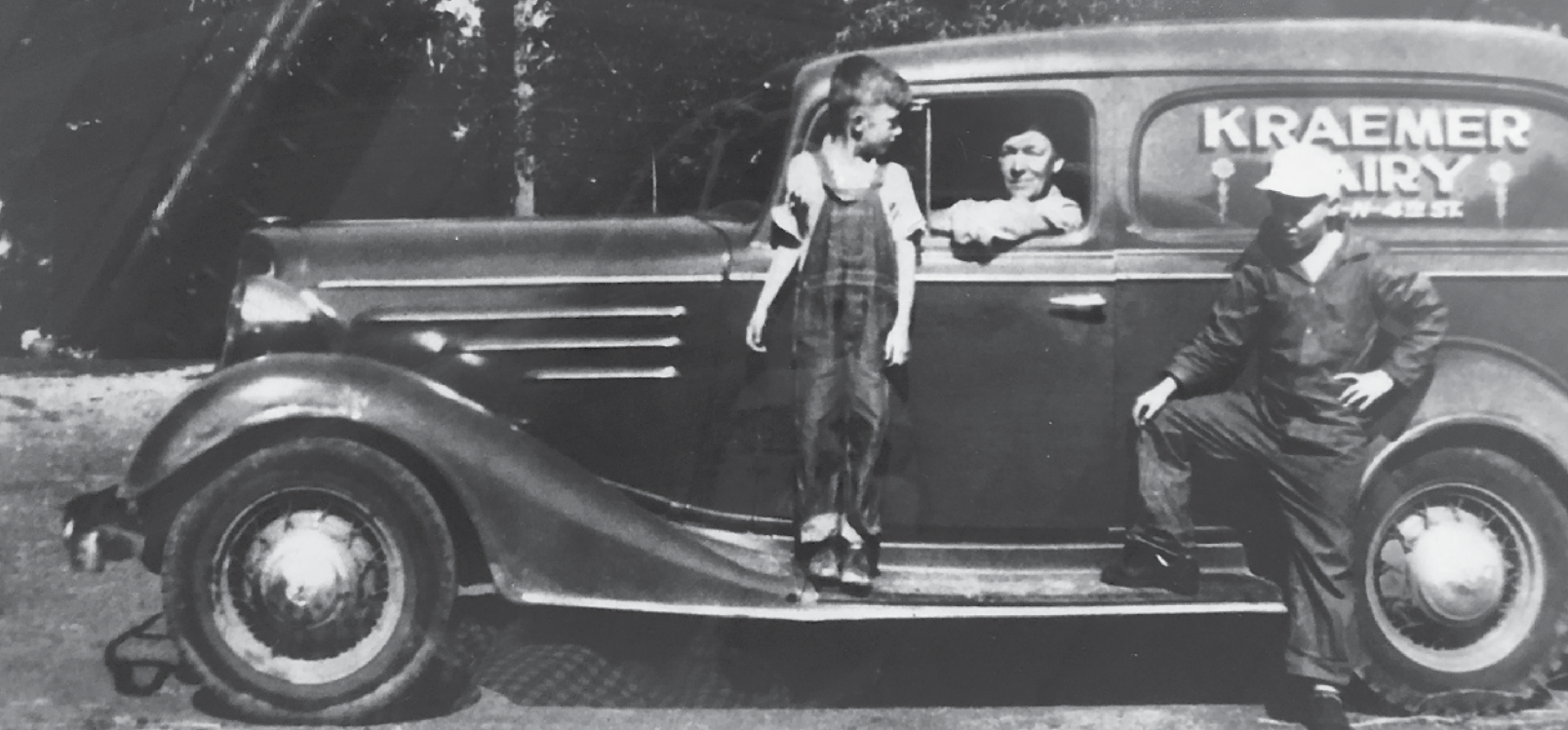
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and the new flavors found their way to a new clientele.

But creating a cheese shop never was in the plans for his parents.

Kraemer grew up waiting on customers in the original small cheese shop that sells offerings of state cheesemakers that they select. The store opened in 1972, but it was an incident in Watertown in the 1960s that forced his parents to come up with a new way to make a living.

They were dairy farmers, and a water issue in the city led to the family losing its 36 cows.

Soon, they turned from farmers to retail sales.

With six children in the family, Kraemer said all of them worked at the cheese shop. And now generations of their children are doing the same.

His father asked if he wanted to organize sales for the business, and Kraemer now has been doing that for 30 years.

Crafting their own cheese spreads came about in the '80s.

Now they try to create a few new flavors each year. But with the pandemic, there was no debut of those flavors. So, this year, the six new ones will hit shelves.

When trying to create the right taste in a spread, Kraemer said he has plenty of people to help. His wife works at Watertown Hospital and has nurses try the new creations.

"We make a spread with Asiago," he said. "I don't think anyone else makes that."



LEFT: Michael Kraemer stands next to a photo of his parents Jim and Joanne at the Watertown cheese shop they created.

TOP: A photo of Michael's father Jim standing on the runner of a company vehicle in the 1930s.

ABOVE: The old barn is now attached to the cheese shop.

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When an idea comes to mind, Kraemer said his father never waits. He moves forward and that's a sense of entrepreneurship that the family has learned.

Walking past a photo of his father standing on the rail of an early 1930s Ford as a child, Kraemer talked about how his family has endured in the cheese business. And it's amazing, he said, they still are here.

They are in a mom-and-pop model for business, he said. And it's always been about customer service and quality.

"You earn loyalty the way you treat people," he said.

"We've been fortunate. It's been a nice business."

His father still comes to the store on occasion and helps out. And the thing about the industry, he said, is how generous cheesemakers are in Wisconsin.

The cheese shop was remodeled seven years ago and sits attached to a barn from 1898.

And creating a cheese spread using the hottest pepper in the world doesn't produce the hottest spread because so little is used, Kraemer said.

But that doesn't stop people from wanting to take the hot challenge.

NEW CHEESE ON THE BLOCK

When she talks about cheese, Sandy Speich will tell you about subtle flavors in her favorites as if they were a fine wine.

And perhaps they are.

"It's what is in the air," she said of

where a cheese's flavors come from. "It's what the cows eat. The natural floral. All that stuff."

Speich has the job everyone in the world wants — well, at least those of us addicted to cheese. Good cheese, that can be paired with anything.

She is the creamery director for Hoard's Dairyman Farm Creamery in Fort Atkinson that began its adventure in cheesemaking three years ago with Speich leading the way.

While many people refer to her as "The Cheese Lady," Speich works with cheesemakers in the state who help take the milk from the Hoard's Dairyman Farm and its Guernsey cows to create cheese that won them two top prizes at the Wisconsin State Fair this year — for their Gouda and Belaire.

While she grew up on a dairy farm near Sullivan, cheese was not something Speich really discovered until later in life.

"I grew up on Velveeta and an occasional brick," she said.

Her father-in-law, however, is a cheesemaker. She found herself working for a company that made cheese ingredients and got to know the industry and its workers across the state.

"It's a wonderful group of people," Speich said.

"Most cheesemakers are friends and they will help you. But not give you any of their secrets."

While there are few women cheesemakers in the state, she said everyone is so friendly and all are trying to create something good.

The photos on the page are from the cheesemakers for Hoard's Dairyman Creamery where Sandy Speich helps create varieties, two of which won first place at the Wisconsin State Fair this year — the Belaire and Gouda.

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“Most cheesemakers are friends and they will help you. But not give you any of their secrets.” — Sandy Speich



For Speich, her first cheese for Hoard’s was a Belaire, that is creamy and blends the high fat content from the cows beautifully. She also makes a Sark, Gouda, camembert and a sharp cheddar.

When Hoard’s wanted to make cheese, Speich started on designing what to make —expanding the number of cheeses and their product that can be found at Jones Market and places like Metcalf’s in Madison and even the Public Market in Milwaukee.

The industry is not as simple as shipping milk to a cheesemaker, she said. Speich is there to help and make sure the product hits the quality she is looking for.

“They are all gentlemen. I’ve known them for a long time. It’s like working with friends, actually,” she said.

When trying a new cheese, Speich said it’s a year process before that will hit the market.

The next two cheeses she is looking at making include a dry jack and a Dunlop.

While she spends time creating products, Speich also has gotten to know cheesemakers across the state and their work, including a cave-aged gouda and one of her favorites — Dunbarton Blue.

Competition between cheesemakers in the state helps create great products, she said.

“It’s good to have someone come in and push everyone else,” Speich said.

While she might have grown up on Velveeta, you would never guess that these days.

“Now I’ve become a cheese snob,” she said.

And her reason she likes working with cheese is simple.

“I just like to eat it.”

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