

GUEST COLUMNIST



CMN Exclusive!



Perspective: Industry Innovation

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A dairy Christmas to all

With the holidays upon us, I can honestly say that I put my money where my mouth is this year by personally increasing demand for California cheese through cheese gift packages. One of the delights of giving cheese is presenting the receiver with an opportunity to sample something they have never before considered. A new flavor experience, exposure of our products to new markets, support for our California industry — it's a win through and through.

Growing up in Chicago cheese was a part of my daily diet, but I had a cheese palate mostly limited to Cheddar. Like many before me, grilled cheese sandwiches were and still are a great comfort. And who can forget those meatless Fridays where the

school lunch box more often than not contained some cheese-filled nourishment or sardines — guess which one I preferred? It's no wonder I'm a cheese fanatic to this day. Just the thought makes me salivate.

Cheese is a staple in many foods we commonly eat — not only in the obvious like cheeseburgers and sandwiches but also as protein in salads, soups and pasta dishes. In addition, there are specialty cheeses on cheese trays and in fondue, and cheeses stuffed in a variety of other imaginative dishes. It seems that cheese is our BFF.

However, as I think of the world situation and new demands for U.S. dairy products overseas, it occurs to me that most of the world does not have the same luxurious relationship

with cheese that we Americans enjoy. The world envies our access to cheese and dairy foods for two fundamental reasons: nutrition and diversity. Cheese is relatively affordable and it is packed with goodies like protein and calcium, among other benefits. Just as cheese in all its varieties has opened up endless culinary options in this country, cheese also has been a major contributor to the outstanding health of our country.

Oil-producing desert countries and economic powerhouses like China understand this. Their people cannot eat money. They understand that the cheapest and easiest way to bring solid nutrition to their people and more excitement to their daily fare is to deliver dairy products like cheese. Cheese is relatively low in moisture and low in lactose, important for some populations that lack the ability to digest lactose. Including cheese in the daily diet of populations unaccustomed to it stands as the real challenge to our manufacturers but the reports of overseas sales show we are making great inroads.

How do we continue to position dairy products from cheese and beyond to be compatible with indigenous food habits? By thinking beyond our own preferences. That very same grilled cheese sandwich so familiar to kids throughout the United States can be completely foreign (and even disgusting) to another culture. How do our products — cheese, ice cream, butter, etc. — fit in to the flavor profiles these markets crave? How

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can we deliver the nutrition of dairy in a package compatible with how other cultures live? Innovation in dairy product development and packaging are key, and that means food technologists and food scientists need to think outside the laboratory as well.

Bringing more food diversity and nutrition to the world makes it a more peaceful place. The U.S. dairy industry stands as a unique symbol of this concept. At this time of year, it is good to reflect on the blessings we have and our ability and willingness to share them with others. When people are well fed, peace follows. What a blessed industry we have. Merry Christmas to all. CMN

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