

A Small Town's Big Cheese

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With over 100 years of experience and a commitment to local dairy production, Westby Cooperative Creamery has kept one foot planted in the traditions of the past and a keen eye on the future.

A small, Midwestern town, Westby, Wisconsin covers just over two square miles, and a sign at the edge of town announces, "Population: 2,045." Westby is located in the Driftless region of the upper-Midwest where glacial formations long ago carved deep river valleys and left soaring plateaus marking the landscape.

It was in this idyllic setting that Westby Cooperative Creamery began its operations over 100 years ago. In 1903 a small band of local farmers chose to combine their resources to produce butter as a collective. Nearly 107 years later, after many dairy co-ops in the region have come and gone, Westby Co-op is still producing.

Today, the company remains farmer-owned, but the co-op has moved well beyond its humble beginnings. Westby Co-op is the largest employer in the city, and its 70 employees and 120 patrons work together to produce over 19 million pounds of product each year — and in addition to the butter that started it all, the co-op now has a product line that ranges from yogurt to dips and 14 different varieties of hard cheeses.

Simplifying Organic Production

A certified organic product is one that has met United States Department of Agriculture standards in accordance with its National Organics Program. According to the USDA,

organic production aims to integrate “cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity.” To that end, the NOP’s strict guidelines monitor food production throughout the supply chain.

In order to navigate the sometimes complex guidelines set forth by the NOP, most food producers considering organic production seek assistance through two channels — organic consultants and organic certification organizations.

Organic Consultant

Seeking an organic consultant may be useful to food producers, especially those new to organic production. A consultant will evaluate a facility’s operations and make suggestions for cost effective ways to meet USDA organic standards. Integrated Organic Services, an organic certification consulting company, lists the following as just a few of the services provided by a consulting firm before seeking organic certification:

- Development of organic production systems that comply with specific organic certification standards
- Development and revision of internal control systems
- Education and training programs
- Application and document preparation for submission to the certification agency
- Ingredient sourcing
- Perform internal on-site inspections
- Post-inspection compliance implementation

Organic Certification Agency

USDA regulations prohibit organic certification agencies from providing consulting services. Once a facility is prepared to submit itself to the certification process, the consultant chosen to

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help implement organic practices may serve as a liaison between the producer and the certification agency.

Organic certification agencies are third party organizations which are accredited by the USDA to evaluate production practices and approve certification. Quality Assurance International, the largest of such organizations, certifying approximately 65 percent of the organic products in stores today, suggests that once a facility chooses a certification agency, the process will take between eight and 10 weeks to complete.

As the organics market continues to grow, producers may find that working with experts who are familiar with the certification process and its complex guidelines will pave a clearer path to certification.

The More Things Change...

Westby's history has been one of steady growth. As dairy standards modernized, so did Westby's operations. The pasteurization equipment and refrigerated space required to keep Westby's butter fresh soon demanded more operating space than the co-op had available. In 1927, Westby moved its operations to 401 S. Main St., where it is still located today. The Westby headquarters — which occupy nearly an entire square block at the heart of town — include offices, a small store and several buildings where milk is received and pasteurized and where dairy products are produced.

Until 1992, Westby Co-op's primary business was dedicated to producing dairy products for Dean Foods. After the relationship between Westby and Dean was severed, the co-op diversified by acquiring several new private label customers and producing, for the first time, under the WESTBY brand label.

And Westby is still growing. In the last two years, the company has experienced 20 percent growth and is projecting an additional 20 percent in 2010 with total sales of \$36 million. The creamery currently receives 250,000 pounds of milk per day from its patrons, which its employees process in the 40,000 square-foot Westby facility. But after over 70 years in one location, Westby has this year commissioned an engineering study to evaluate whether the current production facilities can be made more efficient in order to produce more product, or whether the creamery will need to undertake new construction in order to meet the demand of the growing business.

Westby's farmer-owners are still heavily involved with the decision making and day-

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to-day operations of the co-op. A board meeting is held each month, during which Westby farmers vote on a variety of issues.

Reggie Way, Plant Manager of the Westby Cooperative Creamery explains, "The owners will vote on anything from what they want to do with the facility, if we want to expand the product line, if we want to take on more farms or not. The patrons really steer the direction of the business."

Going Organic

Westby is committed to producing natural, healthy products. Its farmers produce rBST-free milk, and none of the patrons inject cows with hormones that could boost milk production. Westby launched into the organics market about five years ago, and today, nearly half of its patrons use organic practices. The milk produced in this fashion is used to make Westby's growing line of organic products.

Way sees the organic market as one with continuing opportunity for growth. He says, "The potential for expansion in the organic market is still there. It's still a market that is growing and that customers are interested in." One of Westby's more recent products is its Cultural Revolution line of organic plain and flavored yogurts. These products have been well-received and wildly successful.

Way says, "Sales of Cultural Revolution have more than doubled in the last year. It has really taken off." In addition to Cultural Revolution, Westby produces a variety of organic products, including sour cream, dips, various cottage cheeses and butter. And Way only sees the organics line expanding.

He says, "New products are determined by customer demand. If the demand for organic products stays high — and I believe it will — we will continue to produce them."

Westby remains close to its roots, even as it branches into new markets and embraces new organic production methods. The cooperative is heavily committed to retaining its image as a local, farmer-owned company. Its roots run deep, and though one of its organic farms is located as far away as Green Bay (about 200 miles from Westby), most of the creamery's patrons are located a stone's throw from Westby itself. The farms remain relatively small. "Our farms vary in size from 30-to-40 cows up to a couple hundred," says Way.

These ties to the community and commitment to small, family-owned farms are apparent not only on the production end of Westby's business, but on the distribution side as well.

Way says, "The WESTBY brand products are shipped all over, but we are predominantly an upper-Midwest company — Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa and Illinois." Way believes that customers respond to the farmer-owned nature of the Westby Co-op and are interested in supporting local businesses and local farmers.

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In addition to its growing organics line, the WESTBY brand is, perhaps, best known for its award-winning cottage cheese — the facility produces six million pounds per year and the creamery took home a gold medal for its four-percent cottage cheese at the 2010 World Championship Cheese Contest, held in Madison, Wisconsin. And, difficult though it may be to believe, Westby's facility is the only one producing cottage cheese in Wisconsin, a state known far and wide for its prolific cheese production.

More Cheese on the Horizon

The future looks bright for Westby Cooperative Creamery. With an expanding organics line and possible plant expansion on the horizon, the co-op is well poised for continued growth.

Way also sees potential in the emerging "all natural" market. He says, "All natural products with a clean label — that's one area I see huge growth in. People are looking for an 'all natural' label."

"Plus, we do have the world's best cottage cheese," Way says with a smile.

The following companies have contributed to the overall success of Westby Cooperative Creamery's facility:

ABB Apollo Valves Arrowhead Conveyor Corporation Baldor Electric Co. Benda Manufacturing Bimba Manufacturing Brookfield Engineering Cargill Creamery Package	Mfg. Co. Danisco Dwyer Instruments Ecolab ESE Fortress Technology, Inc. Kusel Equipment Co. LEESON Electric Mettler Toledo	Ohaus Paul Mueller Comp Sani-Matic Thermo Fisher Scientific Thermo King UL Solutions Walker Group H Zebra Technologies Zitrop Ltd.
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