

California on Track to Move Wisconsin's Cheese Status

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TURLOCK, Calif. — Fifteen years ago, [Anto Baghassarian](#) had a small shop in East Hollywood where he processed blocks of mozzarella from other manufacturers into the string cheese he learned to make at his family's business in [Lebanon](#).

Now his [Karoun Dairies Inc.](#) operates a plant in the state's dairy heartland, turning a couple silos of milk each day into about 16,000 pounds of feta, queso fresco and other exotic cheeses adapted for American palates.

Aided by an abundant supply of milk, an increasing nationwide appetite for cheese and some savvy marketing, manufacturers such as Karoun are contributing to a production boom that could soon propel California past Wisconsin to become the nation's top cheese producer.

California is now the home of [Hilmar Cheese Co.](#) near Modesto, the world's largest single-site, cheesemaking operation. Every day, the plant churns out more than a million pounds of cheddar, Monterey Jack and mozzarella cheeses that are sold under a variety of brand names.

In addition, small California cheese makers have built a name for themselves among consumers and connoisseurs while winning dozens of awards at national and international competitions, casting a positive light on the producers of so-called commodity cheese that dominate the state's cheese industry.

"California cheeses are really looked upon as coming of age," said Christine Hyatt, a grocery store consultant in Portland, Ore., who serves as a judge at the American Cheese Society's annual competitions.

Last year, California turned out 2.14 billion pounds of cheese - nearly a quarter of the nation's supply. The total marked a huge increase from 1985, when the state had only about 7 percent of the national market.

The growth has put California within striking distance of the 2.4 billion pounds produced every year in Wisconsin, the state that bills itself as "America's Dairyland."

Wisconsin's share of the growing national cheese market has fallen from more than a third in 1985 to just over a quarter last year.

Nancy Fletcher, a spokeswoman for the California Milk Advisory Board, said it's hard to predict exactly when California will overtake Wisconsin, but the production trends make it just a matter of time.

Wisconsin, which lost its title as top milk-producing state to California in 1993, is nowhere near surrendering, said Patrick Geoghegan, a spokesman for the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board. "This is not something that we got into over the last 20 years or so," Geoghegan said. "It's been a big part of our past and will continue to be a big part of our future."

Geoghegan said Wisconsin's 1,300 licensed producers make 600 varieties of cheese, compared to the 250 offered by California's 55 producers.

"Bearing the title 'America's Dairyland' is about more than just producing the greatest amount of commodity cheese," he said. "It's about cheese quality, quality, quality."

Cheese has been produced in California since the first European missionaries arrived on the coast with dairy cows in tow. The recipe for its most famous contribution, Monterey Jack, is said to have originated in the Spanish missions.

The modern cheese boom began in the early 1980s, when the California Milk Advisory Board - the marketing agency of the state's dairy business - started promoting the cheese industry as a way to sop up a growing milk surplus.

The group encouraged large cheese producers to set up shop in California, then aggressively marketed the products with the "Real California Cheese" logo featuring a sunrise over rolling pastures and an advertising campaign touting the state's "happy cows."

In the mid-1990s, the board began cultivating smaller, artisanal producers and encouraging dairies to start their own onsite "farmstead" cheese-making operations.

"It's been a very concerted, consistent effort," said Michelle Greenwald, a professor at Columbia University's Graduate School of Business in New York, who uses the board's cheese campaign in class as a marketing success story. "They've left no stone unturned."

Hilmar's factory made 20,000 pounds of cheese a day, five days a week, when it began operating in 1984. It's now a sprawling complex of soaring silos, meandering pipes and milk-filled tanker trucks.

Small cheese-makers, meanwhile, have caught the attention of gastronomes while producing about 10 percent of California's output.

Marin French Cheese Co. in Petaluma took a gold medal for its Triple Creme Brie at the 2005 World Cheese Awards in London, making it the first non-European cheese producer to take top honors in the category.

Another gold medal at those awards went to Modesto's Fiscalini Cheese Co. for its San Joaquin Gold, which began as a failed attempt to make fontina.

Owner John Fiscalini was one of the state's first dairymen to enroll in a cheese-making class started in 1995 by the milk board at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. He now channels about 10 percent of the milk from his 1,500 cows into cheese production and is seeking the county's permission to expand his cheese-making workshop so he can manufacture even more.

"I just got caught up in some of the ambiance and the romance," Fiscalini said.