



# SLICE, ZIP, *squeak!*

Sargento's product innovation lets nothing stand in the whey

*By Sean Johnson*

Photographs by Shane Van Boxtel/Image Studios

BACKGROUND PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SARGENTO





Does it squeak? Anyone from Wisconsin knows that really fresh cheese (especially curds) will squeak with every nibble. Sargento CEO and head cheese Lou Gentine leads the innovation quest for making cheese fresh and convenient. At Sargento, "humor and fun" are written into the corporate culture statement and over the years, mouse characters have factored into the marketing.



# It's just not enough to call Lou Gentine a cheese head.

True, he likes cheese. His license plate does say PROVO, short for his favorite cheese. He is also a big Green Bay Packers fan. The Gentine family has long had roots in the Plymouth area.

He would seem to qualify in every sense of the word. But the term just does not seem inclusive enough to encapsulate Gentine.

Perhaps head cheese would be better. After all, he has spent much of the last 30 years guiding Sargento, his family's business, into a leader in the cheese industry, essentially inventing at least one category of consumer cheese products and much of the packaging consumers have come to expect.

And he doesn't even make the cheese.

"We don't actually make cheese here," says Gentine, chief executive officer and chairman of Sargento. "We contract for it with some very specific standards. The packaging was key to what my father started."

What his father started as a side

business to meet a demand for Old World cheeses from ethnic groups in Milwaukee has since grown into an industry leader in terms of cheese marketing and packaging. Sargento is one of the largest, privately-held cheese companies in the United States, with nearly 1,500 employees and net sales in excess of \$975 million.

"In their role as marketer, they are by far the innovator when it comes to cheese, especially in the shredded market," says Jeanne Carpenter, executive director of Wisconsin Cheese Originals, a Dane County-based organization dedicated to sharing information about new artisan cheeses.

"Before Sargento, it was all pretty much orange and powdery. They were the first to see the opportunity and they took it up a notch."

Shredded cheese, the product which is nearly synonymous with Sargento's success, is now only one of a myriad of cheese products, though still an important one. Sargento now supplies commercial customers and consumers with hundreds of different varieties and forms of cheese, cheese products, appetizers, sauces and snack foods.

## SPIFFED UP HEADQUARTERS

The company has been preparing for growth at its main campus in Plymouth as it gears up for a projected 120 new office and production employees in the next five years. The current headquarters has been renovated and expanded by 5,000 square feet to make room for human resources and wellness facilities; it opens this month. A new 45,000 square-foot, three-story building, designed to house office and production employees, will open in October.

The company is estimated to be 20 times larger now than when Gentine took over.

"They essentially elevated (packaged cheese) from a bulk

**Sargento executive team from left: Kristi Jankowski, SVP Innovation; George Hoff, CFO; Lou Gentine, CEO & Chairman; Louie Gentine, President and Chief Customer Officer; Karri Neils, SVP Human Resources; Mark Rhyan, COO.**



Sargento's Natural Blends are among a line of specialty cheeses available in the Slide-Rite Freshness Seal packages, a company innovation. Artisan Blends, Bistro Blends, Classic ChefStyle, Fancy Shredded and Reduced Fat and Low Sodium cheeses are among many others.

commodity to a desired product,” Carpenter says.

It all started over Romano and Parmesan.

The company's roots go back to 1949, when Leonard Gentine Sr. launched the Plymouth Cheese Counter, a deli and mail order gift house. What Leonard Gentine noticed was a lot of repeat orders from small packages of Italian-style cheeses. He seized the opportunity.

Partnering with Joseph Sartori – the founder of Sartori Cheese, also based in Plymouth – the company began by selling small packages of Romano, Parmesan, Mozzarella and Provolone cheese. It would be the first of many innovations for the company that consumers nationwide take for granted today, including packaged shredded cheese, vacuum packaging to keep cheese fresh, zippered packages and the peg-bar system for supermarket displays (see sidebar).

Along the way, it also debuted new lines of blended cheeses and launched its food service lines. Recent additions there include its Artisan Cheese blends, which feature limited availability blends using cheeses from some of the best artisan cheese makers.

Many of the company's innovations have helped other cheese makers, says Carpenter, especially when it comes to packaging.

“That just benefits the entire industry,” she says. “Wherever you can make it economical to use, store and ship cheese, it's good for everyone from the dairy farmer to the end consumer.”

In 1965, Sargento became wholly-owned by the Gentine Family when it purchased Sartori's shares. The two cheese families “are still good friends



## SARGENTO CHEESE PACKAGING INNOVATIONS

Sargento pioneered the cheese packaging industry with many innovations, including:

- » **1955** Leonard Gentine develops vacuum packaging for cheese to keep its freshness, allowing it to be shipped greater distances and stored longer.
- » **1958** Sargento becomes the first to market shredded cheeses, launching a product that now accounts for up to 30 percent of sales.
- » **1969** Sargento introduces the peg-bar system for supermarkets to display packaged cheese.
- » **1986** Sargento debuts zippered, resealable packaging for its cheeses.
- » **2001** Sargento launches its Slide Rite Advanced Closure System for cheese packages.

and enjoy a very friendly rivalry,” Lou Gentine says of the fellow Wisconsin cheese maker.

“Absolutely, it is friendly,” says Jim Sartori, CEO of Sartori Company. “The families are great friends. They have been a great corporate citizen and we have worked together on many things for the community. We compete in a few areas – their business model is different. But, they are also a customer of ours as well, so we do some business together.”

Indeed, there are several major cheese makers and packagers in the Sheboygan County area, which at one time billed itself as the nation's cheese capital.

## INNOVATOR IN CHEESE PACKAGING

For the Gentines – both father and son – the recipe for success has been to follow in the footsteps of the company's founder and encourage a climate of innovation. As large as the company has become, it still tries to live up to that culture.

“They have done a wonderful job of growing their segments of the industry,” Sartori says. “They have driven a lot of growth in this state and others for cheese makers to supply them with cheese for all of their products. That helps the cheese makers, and in turn it helps the dairy farmers.



Responsibility for many of the company's innovation efforts rest with Kristi Jankowski, the senior vice president for innovation, who admits great ideas do not always work out as planned. Still, the company is always looking for better processes or products to meet demand, whether that's the end consumer in the grocery store or perhaps the grocery store itself.

"Everything we do is based on consumer needs and interests," Jankowski says. "The large majority of good ideas don't turn out. There are so many pieces to making a good idea a successful product."

Yet the company has had many innovative successes, from packaging to new cheese products. Jankowski says what matters is the constant drive to innovate and take care of customers.

There is, of course, a strong passion for cheese at Sargento, which probably helps explain the many new cheese products the company introduces.

Jankowski's personal favorite is the Cheddar Mozzarella blend the company introduced earlier this year as part of the Natural Blends line. "It looks a lot like the Colby Jack, which has been around forever, but the texture is firmer and the flavor is sharper. It is truly a unique combination," she says.

Another factor driving innovation, says Lou Gentine, is that the company has stuck by one of the guiding principles of its founder.

"Hire good people and treat them like family," says Gentine, discussing some of the core principles that have helped Sargento thrive for so many years.

"A lot of people like to be given the opportunity to present new ideas," he says. "We listen. We have a system that allows for those ideas to be heard. Sometimes they wind up on the back burner because we have more important things to work on, but we listen to them."

That employee-driven culture resulted in Sargento being named Southeast Wisconsin's top employer in 2010, in the *Milwaukee Journal-*

*Sentinel's* Top Work Place employee survey, which Gentine considers an honor given the competition.

The company also maintains a very broad definition of family.

Lou Gentine is the only one of the second generation still involved with Sargento. Following him, there are four from the third generation who also work for the company, including Louie Gentine, who is expected to step into the overall leadership role in the future.

Like his father, Louie Gentine did not immediately jump into the family business.

"I started out as a community banker," says Louie Gentine, president and chief customer officer. "I got to see a lot of different businesses and learn about them. After a while, though, I knew I wanted to go back."

When he did return, he worked his way through the ranks, starting out in the marketing department and also spending time in production and procurement before moving towards his current role.

"Each of those steps gave me a perspective on different parts of the business," he says.

His experience is not considered unique at Sargento, which employs multiple generations of many employee families.



**Sargento's second generation leader Lou Gentine poses with a portrait of his parents, Leonard and Delores Gentine. Leonard Gentine Sr. started the company in 1949 and early on partnered with Joseph Sartori, founder of Sartori Cheese; the two blended their names to create Sargento a few years later. The Gentine family purchased the Sartori family's shares in 1965.**

## **Sargento Foods Inc.**

**Founded:** 1949 by Leonard Gentine Sr., who partnered with Joseph Sartori – the founder of Sartori Cheese, also based in Plymouth. In 1965, Sargento became wholly-owned by the Gentine Family when it purchased Sartori's shares.

**Employees:** 1,500

**Net sales:** \$975 million

**Website:** [www.sargento.com](http://www.sargento.com)



**➔ ONLINE:** Click here to see a video of Lou Gentine talking about innovation at Sargento.

**“Both my father and grandfather leave a strong legacy of creating that culture of mutual respect and trust here at Sargento. That is a meaningful differentiator for us, and it will be on my shoulders to continue it.”**

— Louie Gentine, Sargento president and chief customer officer

“We have many families here with multiple generations,” says Lou Gentine. “Some of them have more family members working here than we do.”

From Louie Gentine’s perspective, that’s a principle worth continuing.

“Both my father and grandfather leave a strong legacy of creating that culture of mutual respect and trust here at Sargento,” he says. “That is a meaningful differentiator for us, and it will be on my shoulders to continue it.”

That culture also extends beyond the workplace. Sargento is involved in multiple community causes both within the local area and across the state, ranging from meal programs and food pantries to the Packers Touchdown for Charities to the Generations center for the Plymouth Intergenerational Coalition, which pairs up senior citizens and young children in the Plymouth area.

For Sargento, it’s all about being a good citizen in the community that has meant so much to their success. “It is our responsibility to be involved,” says Lou Gentine. “If you are fortunate, you ought to give back.”

Sargento is a tremendous asset for Plymouth and the greater Sheboygan County area, says Lisa Hurley, executive director of the Plymouth Chamber of

Commerce and Visitors Center.

“A corporate entity like Sargento adds stability to the economic climate,” she says. “They are very generous with the local community, which just enhances the quality of life here.”

For Hurley, those enhancements include the Intergenerational Coalition, the Plymouth Art Center and the recent Walldogs Rock the Cheese Capital event, which featured 160 artists painting 21 murals around downtown Plymouth in a single weekend.

### **TIED INTO THE COMMUNITY**

Sargento has also been a major contributor to educational causes, including donating a high-speed manufacturing line that will be used by both Plymouth High School and Lakeshore Technical College to help train the next generation of high-tech manufacturing employees.

The \$1.2 million training center opened its doors for classes June 21, with Sargento’s contribution being a critical piece for securing the federal grant, says LTC Dean Peter Thillman. The training center will help meet the needs of many area manufactures, not just Sargento, he says.

“This skill set is one that will be in demand for years to come,” Thillman

says of the high-speed line that students can now study. “We can teach all the basics, but until you see it, you really don’t understand it. Now, they can take it apart, put it back together and get a feeling for how to diagnose problems that might be caused by an issue 50 feet up the line.”

Louie Gentine says the opportunity to be involved in projects like the Intergenerational Coalition and the new training facility are what brought him back home to Sargento. If the companies that benefit from the community don’t work to make it stronger, the results are losses for everyone.

“The community is one of our stakeholders,” Louie Gentine says. “We want it to be more than just a good place to work; we want this to be a good place to live, especially for families. These efforts benefit everyone, not just Sargento.”

Direct involvement in projects with that scope and benefits will be one of the things Lou Gentine misses when he finally passes the reins on to the next generation of leadership. While no formal announcements have been made, nor plans disclosed, he knows that soon his time guiding Sargento will draw to a close.

For Gentine, moving on to the next step will mean more time to spend with family. He has three children and eight grandchildren all living within 10 miles of Plymouth.

“I have really enjoyed the role that I have played in guiding this company,” Lou Gentine says. It will be hard not to be here every day, but it will soon be time to hand over the reins.”

But don’t expect any major changes. The company’s plans include remaining private and family-held. In many ways, the spirit of the company’s founder will continue to guide the company into the future.

“It’s important to maintain the culture we have developed,” Lou Gentine says. “There are still a lot of opportunities to grow ourselves.” **1**