

# Brewing up a storm for cheese

by Kobus Mulder

Dairy farmers will remember the beginning of this century as a period of low milk prices in an oversupply situation. Cheese manufacturers, on the other hand, will remember the number of medium-sized and boutique cheese makers that entered the cheese manufacturing industry.



The weak rand at the time kept dairy imports at bay. Although exporting cheese under the EU/SA Free Trade Agreement was on everybody's mind, the cancellation of the export certificates of all formerly EU-approved cheese manufacturing plants obstructed it.

Domestic *per capita* consumption of cheese that always hovered around a low 1,3 kg, appeared in the spotlight again. Consumer education, to increase *per capita* consumption, became a hotly discussed topic at industry meetings. Because of the unavailability of funds, the industry was forced to form feasible plans that were carried over to subsequent meetings' agendas.

Agri-Expo, the 175-year-old Cape of Good Hope Agricultural Society who is bound by its constitution to support agriculture, also debated the situation and decided to play a leading role in a sustainable strategy to increase domestic *per capita* consumption. The strategy was based on a four-pronged action plan that would firstly afford cheese makers the opportunity to showcase their products while interacting and building relationships with customers and consumers.

Secondly, regular cheese consumers would be introduced to the newly-available varieties and thirdly, occasional consumers would be exposed to the gastronomical pleasure of cheese. Lastly, it was decided that these educational activities should be done in a fun and relaxed atmosphere. It is this fourth action plan that cemented the idea of the South African Cheese Festival.

### What is the cheese festival?

The main objective was – and will always be – to promote cheese and increase consumption to benefit all the players in the value chain. It was decided to use the well-known cheeses, and newer varieties, to implement a range of educational programmes to shape the festival in such a fashion that this is achieved.

Regular and new cheese consumers would be introduced to the wider applications of cheese as a cooking ingredient to transform them into consumers – the “Enhancers”, who would prefer cheese as the main ingredient in a dish, or as part of a menu. The important roles that flavour, texture and nutrition play would be used to convince them.

Traditionally, South Africans are not renowned as regular cheese snackers, nor do they include

an appetising cheese platter at the end of a meal. However, it was decided to reveal the flavour enjoyment of cheese snacking that would convert them from occasional cheese snackers to “Cravers”.

“No man can live from cheese alone.” Although cheese is an almost complete food, it is necessary to introduce consumers to the eating pleasure when enjoyed with food products such as wine, bread, olives, pickled fruit and vegetables.

It is impossible to fully understand the incredible journey of cheese without knowing its origins. It was therefore decided to give all the dairy animals their rightful place at the festival.

An emotional bond with a product, or brand, ensures continued support. It is formed more easily under pleasant circumstances. For this reason, the enjoyable surroundings of a working farm, with its shady oak trees and surrounding blue mountains, was chosen as the venue.

### The philosophy behind cheese promotion

Cheese needs to be promoted to expand its market. In a South African context, promotion is often one of the last steps in marketing cheese, whereas it should really be one of the first steps – if not the first.

The successful promotion of cheese will increase consumers' perception of its value, thereby increasing demand. However, effective promotion requires the seller to have a thorough knowledge of the product to educate the customer/consumer on its value and uses. A dilemma is how to increase perception of value? The best way is to communicate the differentiation within the variety on offer and the basic attributes of the cheeses such as taste, good value and consistency.

South African consumers generally have a low involvement in dairy products. Cheese is no exception. Therefore, consumers do not spend a lot of time making purchasing decisions about their choices. Previous experiences and price play a major role when these decisions are being made. However, information about cheese and its journey from the cow's udder to the table can play a positive role in changing perceptions about price. It can also convince the consumer to experiment with new flavours and textures.

The key to success in marketing cheese is building relationships. This requires funds and time

to supply information, sampling, demonstrations and other one-on-one actions. Selling cheese through the retail means that relationships should be built with customers and consumers. However, in the food service industry it means interacting with chefs and restaurant managers who need to know the attributes and uses of the cheese.

Brand recognition requires advertising and promotion funds – something that is not always available in a low-margin industry, such as cheese making. However, it is something all cheese makers should aspire to achieve. Larger manufacturers use above-the-line activities to achieve brand recognition, whereas smaller cheese makers can achieve it by interacting and selling directly to consumers and restaurants. This can help spread the word and build relationships at the same time.

### What is happening?

The composition of the festival exhibitors has always been 70% cheese, 15% wine and 15% companion food. Although it was initially thought that the target market would be the 25-54 year-old cheese lovers, many outside this group also made it their festival. Young children accompany their parents to see the sheep, goats and cows being milked and thousands of “seniors” shop for “fresh” cheese until their complementary bags are too heavy to carry, and they need a ride on the tractor & trailer to their cars.

A survey done during the recent festival shows that 86% of the 24 000-26 000 visitors have tasted new cheeses, 82% have met new cheese makers, 78% have gained new knowledge about cheese, while 92% declared that they would be buying a wider variety of cheeses in future. The 5% who came to “network for business purposes” is low, but it converts to 1 250 visitors from retail, supply chain management, food manufacturers, chefs and aspirant cheese makers, which is satisfying.

The fact that 56% of visitors are first-timers indicates that the hunger for cheese knowledge is alive and should be satisfied to the benefit of the industry. The 28% of visitors from outside the Western Cape (of which 2 000 stayed for 2-3 nights) means that cheese is important enough to play a positive role in tourism – cheese tourism, maybe a new concept to explore?

These statistics tell the story of what visitors experience in the 1 900 m<sup>2</sup> Cheese Emporium,

a 28-stall Cheese Market, a 150-seater Cheese Theatre where Cravers can learn about the flavours and uses of cheese and the 200-seater Cooking Pot auditorium where top chefs tutor the Enhancer on how exciting it is to make cheese a part of the everyday menu.

The huge open-air Music Gazebo area is where families and friends gather to discuss their newly discovered cheeses and enjoy an imaginative meal from one of the top restaurants of Franschhoek and Paarl situated in the Gourmet Lane.

### Has it achieved its objectives?

Cheese promotion takes time. The quantitative answer will not be known for a while, as this type of promotion does not always show its results immediately. What is encouraging is that thousands of consumers have strengthened their bond with cheese, while others have forged new ones. Many cheese makers openly state that the festival played a large role in making them in successfully boosting their sales. Retail initiatives that flowed from the Festival's popularity have contributed to making cheese less of a price commodity. More awareness of differentiation and brand building has also been achieved.

Food journalists have fallen in love with cheese and its interesting makers, and have been unbelievably generous in their coverage of the festival. At the same time, they have spread the word on variety, availability, flavour and application to millions of consumers and customers who need to hear it. The fact that journalists have written and spoken a lot more about cheese and its virtues, has undoubtedly helped to make cheese a more romantic product that many people have fallen in love with since the first festival.

### The future

Agri-Expo believes in South African agriculture and is committed to supporting the dairy industry. However, as a non-profit organisation, it will not be able to continue with this type of consumer education without sponsorships and the input of South African cheese makers. This is the challenge for the future.

Agri-Expo is grateful for all the assistance. Nonetheless, it is becoming increasingly difficult to improve and hold the attention of the ever-more demanding consumer. **M&J R**