



Organic Handling in Practice: Cedar Grove

Bob Wills (00:12):

Cedar Grove Cheese is one of the oldest cheese factories in Wisconsin. It's been here since 1878. We've made so many different kinds here from water buffalo to German Clark, and a Brazilian grilling cheese. I'm Bob Wills and I bought the factory in 1989, and the values of organic were just something that we really believed in. I was concerned because a lot of our farmers were dying of cancer, and I was concerned about chemical use on farms. So it seemed like it was better for the cows, better for the people who are eating the cheese, better for the environment. The trick on organics and making organics work is knowing what your customer wants. There are situations in which being certified organic isn't even necessary. If your group of consumers knows how you do things well enough that they don't care about outside certification.

Debby Byrne (01:15):

We are both conventional and organic. Everything in our plant is approved for organic, so I can use it on conventional and organic. So that keeps it simple. That's the goal. Keep it simple, not contaminate.

Debby Byrne (01:30):

When I started with Cedar Grove Cheese, I wasn't even looking for a job. So I come down for an interview, this is in 1999, and I was like, oh, okay, when can you start? And I'm like, okay. So I started as the bookkeeping and then it just evolved because Bob would ask questions like, what's going on with this? And I first was like, I don't know. And then I was like, you know, I'm tired of saying I don't know to everything. So it was, I'll find out. And then when our general manager quit in, I think 2003, I just took over that role.

Debby Byrne (02:13):

Each milk patron that I buy milk specifically from has a number, which is assigned through the state. So I say, I picked up 840. I know he's an organic patron and he's on this milk ticket.

Bob Wills (02:29):

The farm will have a sticker like this and the truck will have a sticker like this.

Bob Wills (02:36):

So the milk hauler takes their phone and they read the QR code on there, and then they'll take a picture of the farm information. They'll type in the amount of milk that was picked up there, and the same, basically the same information that's on that ticket that goes into an electronic file. So what this allows us to do is for any batch of cheese, the consumer would be able to take their package, take a picture of a QR code on the package, and get a list of all the farms that the milk came from. When the milk comes in, we bring a sample of the milk in and we run it for antibiotics, make sure that there's no residuals.



Debby Byrne (03:26):

If it tests negative, then we'll start unloading it into a tank. We have limited tank space, so we do use tanks for organic and conventional, but we always have a washed and a sanitized tank for the organic guidelines with a plaque that's on it, telling if it's organic or conventional.

Bob Wills (04:00):

So this is a logistics system. So this tells us how many pounds we made and then a list of the ingredients that went in. It'll tell me the batch numbers and the dates. So when we wrap out the cheese, then get a scale weight and a sticker for it. So the sticker will tell the type of cheese, the bat, the date number, and the weight of the block. And then it has a QR code on there. And here we have a bunch of cheese. In here we have organic rows and conventional rows. Here you can see this batch of organic white cheddar. We've got the information on it about the total pounds that are on there. We have individual weights for each of the blocks that's on there.

Debby Byrne (05:02):

For the most part, since we keep it very simple, there's not been a lot of changes because if it's not broke, don't fix it. We do start our day with conventional, so we need to have that break of cleaning and sanitizing everything that that's the lines, everything. So we have that break and then we must document it.

Debby Byrne (05:30):

My first inspection probably would've been about 2004. It only takes four to five hours for our inspection. So we're going to walk through the plant, we're going to verify the products that we're using, the chemicals. We're going to go over the paperwork to show the organic integrity of all the ingredients that I'm using. And we're going to do a mock recall.

Debby Byrne (05:56):

The traceability for organic starts at the end and I work completely back. So the first thing we do is we go to our logistics system, and we pick batch trace, and it spits it all out within two minutes. In this organic, you used this rennet, show me that invoice for that. So then I go to my accounting system and I find the invoice for that. Then they'll say, show me the milk ticket. So look at the tank that it pulled out of, the tank that it pulls out of will lead me back to my milk tickets. For me, my first inspection was nerve wracking because even though I knew the systems I didn't know what are they going to ask? How do I know I know it well enough? Which you're always learning, so I'm over that now. The thing that is most important that I realize is if you don't understand something, ask. Do not just think, oh, I know what they're talking about. Because then you might get back your inspection that you don't have this system in place, but you do. So always ask.

Debby Byrne (07:08):

I think because I came in not knowing anything, I think that made my job easier because I got to learn as I went kind of at my pace. Not knowing how much I didn't know made it easier for me to learn as I went. You have to just think, start to finish. And even if it's the littlest thing that you think, well, that's a no brainer, you've got to write it down. So from start to finish, who are you going to buy from? How are you going to raise something organic? Do you test for it to make sure that it's organic? I mean, just completely follow what you think a consumer would want to know as well.

Bob Wills (07:48):

Once you can track everything from farm to family, you have the ability to connect the two of them and to tell the stories about the farms to the consumers.

Debby Byrne (08:00):

Believe in what you're doing, but know it's going to be a heck of a lot of work to get there. I think it feels good to know that you're putting out a safe quality product for people.



United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program

