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Maintain quality, grow business is Supreme's answer to uncertain economic times

By BURKE REED

Cheese is here to stay and in the opinion of those who run Supreme Dairy Farms of Warwick, this is the time for the company to grow despite the pressures of an uncertain economy.

A cheese firm that does whole and retailing, Supreme plans on expanding production and distribution. In addition to cheese the company is distributing tomatoes, flour and meat. Supreme also plans on continuing what they always do best: producing top-notch cheese.

For Supreme, cheese is not just a dairy product to be eaten on a slice of bread or on a cracker. At Supreme, cheese has always been an art form. Such an outlook has helped the company stay in business for more than 75 years, producing tasty cream ricotta cheese and mozzarella cheeses. For a growing number of Italian families in Rhode Island, Supreme Dairy is an essential in the preparation of traditional Italian meals and desserts such as manicotti, ricotta pies and cheesecakes.

But rising costs has put a crimp in things.

Paul Areson, who partnered with Bill Toll to buy Supreme Dairy nearly two years ago, took a break recently from his work in the company warehouse off Jefferson Boulevard to explain.

"This is the time of year that people feel pinched to go out and shop because of the rise in food costs. People don't nearly shop as much as they used to because

they're conscious of spending, however tradition still flows within those who want to celebrate with an Italian meal. It's usually a good season for us," he said.

Supreme has been trying to hold the line on its costs.

"We have had to drop our margins a bit, our prices are cheaper, which is noticeable, but we don't want to rock the market," Areson says. "Things like that do hurt us. We are not increasing prices and hoping to ride this out until the economy [hopefully] gets better."

While it came early and at a time where people are watching pennies, this Easter was good for Supreme. "After going to the stores and seeing how much was left over, I say we broke about even. Though, we did better than previous years because we sold just the same amount but at a time when there were multiple holidays and the economy wasn't at it's finest," Areson says.

When Areson bought the family business it was stable and getting by. What glimmered in Areson's eye was the business' commitment to the customer.

"I had been working in the packaging business. I left the industry to look for a job that was not corporate and one I didn't have to travel." Areson says he fell in love with the cheese company, calling it "unique."

Areson watches the market and the competition carefully. Areson has seen Supreme's competitors grow overtime, but he has also seen them lower the

quality of products to offset the rising cost of milk.

"What keeps the ties between us and the customer is that we are enriched with tradition and what we have to offer we make sure to keep at its best," Toll adds. Toll has been working in the business for 30 years. He was asked to join Areson in a partnership because of his skills and knowledge of the business. Both feel that their loyalty to the customer and the quality of their cheeses is what helps bring their customers back. This is something the business has been doing since the time of Thomas Bruzzese.

Bruzzese founded Supreme in 1932. He grew up in Calabria, Italy and in his younger years, learned the art of cheese production before making the journey to America. From there, he was able to save enough money to buy himself his own cheese-making firm in Providence. When Bruzzese's sons took over the business, they learned everything their father could teach them and the two sons took it upon themselves to teach the new workers the same skills.

Over the years, members of the Bruzzese family have gone their own ways to pursue their own dreams. However Loari Szlashta, a descendant of the family, still sticks with business as an office advisor.

"It's the only job I've ever really had, I enjoy working here and seeing my family's tradition being continued. As for the rest of my family, they worked hard all these years and they do deserve a break."

Although now retired, Vincent and Salvatore Bruzzese poke their heads in from time to time.

Both Areson and Toll enjoy their visits as they help critique products and come up with fresh ideas.

Today, Supreme Dairy Farms have grown and expanded since the days of the Bruzzese family. Even though they have a rather small number of 10 employees (five of the 10 are from Warwick), they hold the title for best ricotta and mozzarella cheese in southern New England. "This is Rhode Island, it's a small community," Toll states. "You go out to Boston, we only have one or two accounts. In Rhode Island we have multiple accounts and it keeps us strong."

Supreme Dairy Farm cheeses are sold in local supermarkets such as Dave's market, Shaw's market, Whole Foods and many others.

Most of Supreme's milk base materials come from Ohio, New Jersey and New York. Some of their raw materials even come straight from Italy.

Among the many restaurants that buy from Supreme are Venda Ravioli, Picasso's Pizza, Casserta, Don's Pizza, LaSalle, Marchetti's and even the Ronzio's pizza chain.

Supreme has even expanded product-wise. They are famous for their ricotta and mozzarella but offer multiple forms of cheeses. They have added two new skims to their cheese for those who are trying to make healthier choices, and made new cheese blends, which they sell to delis and pizzerias. They have even broken out of the cheese form and began to distribute meats to different delis in the area, flour and fresh tomatoes.

The company Web site is: www.superdairiesfarm.com



BIG WHEELS AT SUPREME: Bill Toll at the controls of a fork lift and Paul Areson, partners at Supreme Dairy Farms as seen on the job at the company based in Warwick. The company is best known for its cheeses that it has been producing for the last 75 years. (Warwick Beacon photo)