Our cooperative’s goal of shifting from a commodity-based to a value-added provider took another leap this year with the introduction of a new product. Cheese curd crumbles had previously been considered a by-product of the cheese curd manufacturing process, but no more! With new equipment in the processing plant we’re now shaking out the “crumbs” and packaging them for food service applications.

This is a first for our industry and research has indicated there’s a big market for the product. The USDA agrees and has awarded our cooperative a Value-Added Producer Grant (VAPG), which will offer matching funds for promotion of the product.

Cheese curds are a popular item in restaurants throughout the Midwest and are gaining popularity across the country. The restaurant industry is a competitive one and restaurant owners and executive chefs are looking to take advantage of the love of the curd to create craveability among their customers.

Because the product is new, educating chefs about the product, and speaking their language, is key to building a true market for Crumbles. To ensure we’re working the right angles and hitting on the correct hot buttons for that industry, we’ve been working with Jim Kyndberg, Executive Chef at the Minneapolis Radisson Blu, to create unique and creative recipes. Jim’s task: to utilize our Cheese Curd Crumbles in a way that appeals to a wide range of tastes, incorporates current and upcoming restaurant trends, can be easily customized for exclusivity, and are realistic to prepare in most restaurant kitchens.

Dishes such as Tomato Bisque with Crispy Curd Crumbles, Gourmet Grilled Cheese Ala’ Ellsworth, Chicken Cordon New, and Midwestern Poutine are just a few of the creative ideas he’s developing for us.

And since the restaurant market is so visual, we’ll be creating each recipe in video format, featuring Chef Jim showcasing our products and offering tips and techniques for using them in the commercial kitchen. The videos will be used as a product awareness, sales and educational tool, and with modifications can also be targeted to general consumers.

We had the opportunity to test some of Chef Jim’s recipes this summer when the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board brought a group of executive chefs for a tour of our facility. Walt Disney World, Universal Parks & Resorts, Ritz Carlton, Atlanta Marriott Resorts, Square 1 Burger & Bar and East Lake Country Clubs were just a few of the organizations in attendance. Chef Jim prepared several of the new recipes, which were served to the group. The feedback was extremely enthusiastic and our sales team converted much of that interest to actual sales! Needless to say, we’re extremely excited about the future of this product!
Introducing Jason Tremain
If you’ve visited our retail store in Ellsworth over the last few months chances are you saw a new face among the staff. Jason Tremain officially began his duties as Senior Retail Store Manager in September, filling the position previously held by Beth Ingli.

Jason comes to us with several years of retail experience, including nearly 10 years with Restaurant Depot, a wholesale cash and carry foodservice supplier. As the Assistant Senior Branch Manager, overseeing all perishable, refrigerated and frozen foods, he was very familiar with our product line, which was part of the Restaurant Depot inventory.

Tail Docking: A Lesson for our Industry
By Paul Bauer, CEO, Manager paulb@ellsworthcreamery.net

At the recent NMPF Annual Meeting, the largest retailers in the U.S., which included Chobani, Walmart, Starbucks and Kroger, were asked, “What do you have against tail docking?” None of them had an answer.

The reality as I see it: Tail docking is being banned due to an effort brought forward by consumers and the European Union (EU). This should be a wake-up call and a lesson to dairy farmers that all farming practices are on the cusp of being monitored, controlled and/or banned if we aren’t proactive in providing a reasonable explanation that consumers can understand and support.

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Geographical references on cheese names, such as Feta, Parmesan, Asiago and Gorgonzola may be a thing of the past for American cheese producers. The EU has a policy and diplomatic procedures in place to restrict the use of these well-known names by American producers for these consumer favorites. Our leaders in the dairy industry and government are only now getting up to speed on how to band together to protect the use of these names by American producers.

A recent example of this teamwork is the Trans-Pacific Trade Agreement where the EU and New Zealand wanted to open up the dairy industry. The dairy industry fought back, winning small concessions to open up the Canadian dairy market without giving up access of any significance to the U.S. dairy market. This win is an example of the political awareness and diplomacy that is necessary in our industry to secure our prosperity in the future.

Big Wins at the NMPF National Cheese Competition
The National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) held its 2015 Annual Meeting October 26-28 at the Orlando World Center Marriot in Orlando, FL. Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery was represented by board members Dan Rosen, Scot Meyer, Jerry Croes and Terry Thompson and CEO, Paul Bauer.

The theme of this year’s meeting was “Legacy of Leadership.” At the meeting, attendees gained valuable insight into how national dairy policy and promotion organizations are partnering for progress and creating a world of opportunities for dairy farm families. As our CEO, Paul Bauer, shares in his message to the left, this is going to be particularly important for our industry into the future.

Aside from the networking with other dairy professionals and industry news, one of the highlights of the annual meeting was the Championship Cheese Competition, held each year to coincide with the annual event.

We’re thrilled to report that Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery brought home several awards, with our cheese curds sweeping the ‘Snack Cheese’ category! Our Blaser’s Red Rind Muenster, made in our Comstock plant, took first place in the ‘Natural Cheese’ category, beating out a peer consumer creamery.

Our Blaser’s Hot Pepper Jack, also crafted in our Comstock plant, took top honors with a first place win, shutting out the competition yet again in the ‘Unique Flavored’ category. And it was a clean sweep in the ‘Natural Cheese Snack’ category with Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery Cheese Curds topping 1st (Natural), 2nd (Taco), and 3rd (Cajun) place, shutting out all the competition for the second year in a row.

The Board extends heartfelt congratulations to all who take part in making our products worthy of such recognition. From our cheese making staff, to you, our patron farmers; it’s your hard work and an ongoing dedication to quality that makes our products award winning and our brand one we can be proud of.

HOT: Habanero Ghost Pepper Jack
To refer to sales of the newest cheese to our artisan cheese line-up as “hot” would be an understatement! Not only is our Blaser’s Habanero Ghost Pepper Jack super spicy to the taste, this cheese has been blowing away sales records and earning praise from everyone from trade show attendees to customers.

According to a recent report in Nation’s Restaurant News, one of the country’s top foodservice publications, fiery foods are on trend for 2016. “From the obvious chilli oil to the now-ubiquitous Sriracha to the creatively inspired spicy maple syrup, American palates are embracing and relishing the heat,” says Andrew Freeman of hospitality consulting firm, Andrew Freeman & Co.

If current sales are any indication, Freeman is on target with his prediction. Inquiries about this cheese are pouring in and our foodservice customers have big plans for how they will use this piquant cheese, including adding a spicy bite to their charcuterie platters and making their burgers and other sandwich selections hot, hot, hot!