



# Women in Leadership



*Their voices, ideas and vision for the future of cheese and dairy.*

**Marieke Penterman is a Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker and the founder and owner of Marieke Gouda in Thorp, Wisconsin**

**What do you think are the most important attributes of a leader, and how do you use your role to help direct, motivate and inspire your team?**

I am constantly learning and want to be a good leader. For me, it isn't about having all the answers — it is more about being willing to do better, to learn and to have a vision.

This means having the right people in the right positions to see our vision through and make it a reality. For that, it is important to create an environment where the team can thrive, where they have fun, where they have the space to contribute and be inspired. Only then will you get the best out of each other.

Growing up on a dairy farm in the Netherlands, as the daughter of hard-working farmer parents, I learned early on that perseverance, resilience and strong morals and values are essential and the backbone of any successful operation.

As the founder and one of the three licensed female cheesemakers of Marieke Gouda, I know that I'm just as strong as my team is. Without the people, my vision would still be just an idea. We work hard, expect accountability and build a team that thrives on shared goals and values. Leadership, to me, is about supporting the team. I wish I could say we have it all together, but we do not. We learn from each other and work together, and we fall, fail and make mistakes, but that is the only way we move forward.

**As a female cheesemaker and company founder in a male-dominated industry, can you share some of the challenges you faced when first creating Marieke Gouda? How has your unique approach to business led to the company's ongoing success?**

Growing up on a dairy farm, it didn't matter which gender you were; the cows needed a refreshed and refilled pen with sawdust, and my brother and I both had to take that wheelbarrow and help get it into the free-stall barn. The

cows did not care either who milked them. My whole school and work career was male-dominated, and I felt okay with that. The problem is when other attributes (compensation, career bumps, etc.) are determined by gender. When I first started Marieke Gouda, I was entering an industry dominated by men, from dairy farming to cheesemaking. It was not directly my colleagues who doubted, but more in the secondary layer (financial institutions, consultants, etc.), whether I could handle the physical work of cheesemaking or make a business out of it. The skepticism wasn't just about me as an individual but also about the idea that a woman, an immigrant no less, could thrive in a world that I had not experienced before because I was new to the industry and had never made cheese before.

I faced challenges securing financing, being taken seriously by suppliers and breaking into the market. But I didn't waste time convincing people I could do it; I just did it. I focused on producing the best Gouda possible and letting the results speak for themselves. When I won my first major award within six months of starting, those same skeptics had no choice but to pay attention.

My approach to business is rooted in persistence, passion and precision. We don't cut corners, never settle and never give up. There is ALWAYS a solution, and we do what it takes. That's been a key driver of our success. I also make sure that my company is as much about people and cows as it is about Gouda. A great team and a strong company culture are the most important ingredients to an excellent product.

**Thinking of leaders and/or role models you have worked with in the past, what are some strategies you have learned from them and adopted, and what are some things you have tried to avoid?**

I've been lucky to learn from amazing people like fellow cheesemakers, business mentors and farmers who've shown me the power of patience and precision. One of the most valuable strategies I've adopted is the ability to pivot. Dairy and cheese production comes with unpredictable challenges, from supply chain issues to market shifts, and the best leaders adjust their strategies without losing sight of the bigger picture.

On the flip side, I've also seen and

experienced what doesn't work: micro-management, lack of communication and resistance to change. I've learned to avoid rigid thinking and to always listen to my team. The best ideas often come from the people working directly with the Gouda process every day, and to remember that to control a situation, is to remain calm.

**Can you please discuss what it means to you to be one of only four females to achieve the Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker certification?**

Earning my Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker certification was one of my proudest accomplishments, not just because of the years of work it took but because it represents a milestone for women in our field. Out of the many Master Cheesemakers in Wisconsin (69), only a handful (4) are women, and I'm incredibly honored to be part of this elite group.

This certification is more than just a title; it's a testament to dedication, knowledge and craftsmanship. It reinforces that women belong in this industry at the highest levels and that excellence isn't limited by gender; your drive determines your destination. I hope my achievement inspires others to pursue mastery in whatever field they're passionate about.

And all the credit goes to my team for giving me the time to do this.

**What do you think traditionally has been a barrier to women entering or advancing in the dairy industry? How have women worked to overcome these barriers and build more opportunities for new generations?**

Traditionally, the most significant barriers for women in dairy have been access to resources, the physical demands of the job and industry bias. Women weren't always encouraged to pursue leadership roles in agriculture and dairy, and even when they did, they often had to work twice as hard to prove themselves.

Women have overcome these barriers through sheer determination and by building networks of support. More women are entering agricultural education programs, stepping into management roles and starting their own dairy businesses. Social media and industry

organizations have also helped women connect and share knowledge in ways that weren't possible before.

Being a mother, an immigrant, a farmer's daughter (and a farmer myself), an entrepreneur and a female cheesemaker has shaped every part of my journey. The dairy and cheese industry has come a long way, and I'm proud to be part of that change. As long as we keep pushing forward, always striving for excellence and encouraging each other, the future will be bright, and we will be unstoppable.

**What can companies and organizations in the dairy industry do to further diversity, equity and inclusion in their hiring and career advancement practices?**

Companies in the dairy industry need to be intentional about diversity, equity and inclusion. That means:

- Actively recruiting, focusing on abilities and drive, and looking beyond gender;
- Providing leadership training and advancement opportunities; and
- Recognizing that different perspectives strengthen a business, whether in production, marketing or leadership.

It's not enough to say we want more diversity; we need to create pathways for it. People are the most valuable part of a successful company, and even better if it is in balance.

**How do you see workplace and executive structures evolving with new generations and priorities? What strategies do you use to help promote a positive and productive company or organizational culture?**

Workplaces are evolving, and younger generations prioritize work-life balance, sustainability and company culture more than ever. I see the future of leadership focusing more on adaptability, team well-being and transparency.

At Marieke Gouda, we foster a culture of collaboration and respect. We work hard, but we also value each person as an individual. My strategy for a positive and productive company culture is simple: hire the right people, empower them and create an environment where they're excited to come to work every day.

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