

MAKERS AND MONGERS

Inside the minds (and rinds) of the cheese world's brightest



Second-generation cheesemaker Bob Steinmann helped to shape Swiss cheese tradition

By Christina Paschen

GREEN BAY, Wis. — The Steinmann family has long been part of Wisconsin's Swiss cheese story. And at 95, Robert "Bob" Steinmann is one of the oldest living Swiss cheesemakers — a second-generation cheesemaker whose influence stretches from small rural vats to some of the most advanced dairy operations in the Midwest.

Bob's cheesemaking career started early. At just 12 years old, he washed his first wheel of Swiss at Holstein Prairie for one of his older brothers. "Born in a cheese plant," as his son Dennis likes to say, Bob grew up immersed in the craft and determined to make his own mark. By his early 20s, he was already running his own factory — learning by doing, observing and listening. He went on to operate facilities in Holbert, Illinois, and Madison, Wisconsin, and later processing plants in Stratford and

La Crosse, Wisconsin. His work eventually led him to Land O'Lakes and later Bongards Dairy in Minnesota, where he helped steer cheesemaking into its modern era.

• Swiss at his core

Making Swiss cheese is a craft that rewards patience, precision and relentless attention to detail — qualities Bob mastered early. And long before today's standardized shortcuts, the process was far more demanding.

Cheese starters, the live bacterial cultures that kick off fermentation and shape a cheese's flavor and texture — were once grown fresh each day and carefully maintained from batch to batch. It was a labor-intensive, manual process that required both skill and intuition.

"Dad was good at understanding and growing the starters — it was as important as making the cheese itself and had to be done every day," says Dennis



GOOD CATCH — Bob Steinmann, who loves to fish, shows off a walleye during a recent outing on Lake Michigan.

Steinmann, retired cheesemaker and original owner of ReNew It Cheese LLC, Kaukauna, Wisconsin.

Bob had a knack for the craft — and it showed in the results.

"He was a one-man show — but he never had a rejected Swiss cheese," Dennis says.

Pre-made starters became widely available in the 1970s, changing how Swiss cheese was made. Despite these shifts, Bob's consistency and mastery made him not only respected but indispensable when companies needed someone who could troubleshoot problems and improve output without sacrificing quality. Dennis spent nearly two decades working alongside his dad, witnessing that mastery firsthand.

• Adaptable, resilient and forward-thinking

While the Steinmann name is closely woven into Wisconsin's Swiss cheese heritage, Bob's career never stayed confined to one category. As the market shifted with a growing demand from the government for processed cheese, he did something not every traditional cheesemaker could do: he pivoted.

Processed cheese required different equipment, different formulations and a different way of thinking. Bob leaned into the challenge with the same determination that carried him through every stage of his life in dairy. He became known for being adaptable and resilient, a cheesemaker

who didn't just respect tradition — he embraced change when the industry needed it.

His career took off as he advanced into leadership at Bongards Dairy, where the scale of production was staggering. The plant turned out 400,000 pounds of cheese a day, seven days a week. Bob oversaw a workforce of 175 employees, managing multiple shifts that kept operations running around the clock. It was an environment that required precision, calm under pressure and the ability to inspire people — and he thrived.

Bob is described as dedicated, committed, resilient, knowledgeable, honest and fair with a tremendous work ethic. These traits didn't come from titles — they came from how he showed up every day, say his family and colleagues.

• Leadership built on fairness, integrity and grit

Bob wasn't just talented — he was trusted. Dennis says his dad treated employees fairly, like family, and they stuck around a long time.

Bob's resilience was tested in 1980, when a fire destroyed the family's Clover Hill cheese plant near Stratford, Wisconsin, just north of Marshfield. Dennis remembers thinking everything was over. But he recalls his dad saying, "We're not done. We're going to rebuild — in a hurry." Dennis

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IN THE FAMILY — Bob Steinmann and his middle son, Terry Steinmann, attend the Green Bay Packers' 80th Training Camp event. Three of Bob's six children, including Terry, followed in his footsteps and went into cheesemaking.

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didn't think it was possible. But his dad got construction crews to work right away — 24 hours a day, seven days a week — and within 10 months a new plant was built. That resilience defines how Bob sees the business — and life.

"The cheese business has a lot of ups and downs. You've got to persevere. Eventually something good may happen," Dennis says of his father's philosophy.

• A legacy passed through generations

Though Bob influenced factories across Wisconsin and Minnesota, his proudest impact is closer to home with his late wife and six children. In fact, all three of his sons went into cheesemaking including Dennis, Terry and Tony Steinmann.

Wisconsin Master Cheesemaker Steve Stettler, president and owner of Decatur Dairy, sees the Steinmann family as foundational in the industry.

"The whole family has a strong impact in the cheese industry," Stettler says. "Bob has deep cheese knowledge and versatile skills. There's a lot of talent, and he and his sons took it and ran with it."

What stood out most for Stettler was Bob's kindness.

"Bob would do anything to help anybody," he says. "He's helped a lot of guys, shared his knowledge, and his work is remembered at Land O'Lakes."

Along with kindness, Bob is equally known for his courage and curiosity.

"Dad's lifelong passion and leadership shone brightly in the cheese industry over many years," says Terry Steinmann, president and co-owner of Winona Foods, Green Bay, Wisconsin. "My dad's dedication to the craft of cheesemaking benefitted not only his sons, but the many people who've been touched by his character, enthusiasm and knowledge of the art of cheesemaking that was passed forward."

Says Stettler, "He isn't scared to try something new and would never shy away from a question. He was an entrepreneur and would take a gamble that most guys would not."

And even now, nearly a century into his journey, Bob remains unforgettable.

"If you ever met Bob, you would know," Stettler says. "His laughter, persona and attitude are unforgettable. The guy is almost 96 and he's still sharp as a tack."

• A True Maker and Monger

"Bob took great pride in being a Swiss cheesemaker," says Dennis.

Inspired by his two older brothers, Bob perfected his technique early on. His attention to detail set him apart — a trait that would define his 20-year career in Swiss cheesemaking before he took over his own plant. Dennis calls him "one of the pioneers," a fitting description for someone whose dedication helped shape the Steinmann

legacy in Wisconsin's cheese industry.

"He's one of the old cheese boys in the brotherhood," Stettler says. "There isn't a cheesemaker in Monroe who doesn't know him."

Bob measures success not by what he made, but by what he built — in his family, in the workforce he mentored and in the industry he helped move forward.

"Bob takes a lot of pride in everything he's done and his family — the

strong family heritage and work ethic he's instilled in his boys are his proudest achievements. He's proud of what everybody does," Stettler says. "He puts other people in front of himself."

According to Terry, "Dad's love of Swiss cheese continues today, as he's said to me several times over the years, that 'A little bit of Swiss cheese daily is the secret to a long life and much happiness.' He may be on to something at 95." **CMN**



We pay tribute to

Robert "Bob" Steinmann

Bob is one of the oldest surviving U.S. Swiss cheese makers and has helped establish and shape Swiss cheesemaking in Wisconsin as a delicious, award-winning cheese. We salute Bob for his unwavering commitment to excellence and his ability to bring out the best in everyone around him.

- Gifted second-generation cheesemaker
- Dedicated to his craft and always willing to help others in the industry grow and flourish
- Teaches hard work, honesty, integrity, diligence, attention to detail and kindness
- Devoted to his family as a loving husband, partner, father, grandfather and great-grandfather

Bob, this tribute is the best way to show you our respect, admiration and gratitude as someone we feel is so important to our lives and the cheesemaking community. Your life has been well spent, and your influence on us will forever remain.

The Steinmann family

"Saying 'old' means saying experience, wisdom, knowledge, discernment, thoughtfulness, listening, slowness."
— Pope Francis