

Making sure feta's star continues to rise

*Automation is one way
to address the problem*



Canada

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While the worst pandemic in over a century may have slowed down many facets of the economy, it has made feta cheese a rising star.

Sales for the product were trending upward pre-pandemic at Amalgamated Dairies Limited (ADL), but CEO Chad Mann said in late 2020 there was a TikTok video released showing a number of feta recipes. With more people at home due to pandemic restrictions, that resulted in a sharp spike in sales worldwide and Prince Edward Island (PEI) was no exception.



It proved to be a case of good timing as the board of directors for the dairy cooperative had already green-lighted expansion plans to automate the feta line at their Summerside plant. Mann said some of the preliminary work to get ready for the expansion has already been done and the equipment is expected to arrive by the end of 2021 or early in 2022.

“Globally, feta sales are up by double digits in 2021,” the CEO explained.

Mann said the company began producing feta cheese in 1991 and “what we did then would be a drop in the bucket to what we produce now. We have grown with the market.” In fact, feta is now the largest item by volume and he noted “the new line will take us to a whole new level of processing capacity.”

Created in 1953, ADL is the largest purchaser and processor of milk on the Island and is 100 per cent owned by the roughly 156 PEI dairy farms found across PEI. ADL produces 25 different cheeses that have been recognized by both the Royal Winter Fair and the British Empire Cheese Awards. As the largest cheese manufacturer and the most diverse dairy in Atlantic Canada, ADL also produces butter, milk, and ice cream, as well as evaporated and sweetened condensed milk.

The expansion will double capacity on the production line from 50 to 100 cups a minute. Mann called the expansion the “next logical step” following a \$20 million expansion of the Summerside plant in 2017.

“Part of that work was creating the infrastructure to put this type of equipment in place,” the company executive explained. “Since that expansion, which increased our capacity by almost 30 per cent, we have seen a 25 to 28 per cent increase in production since 2017. We consider that phase one and this is phase two.”

He praised the contribution of both the federal and provincial governments, who are assisting with the cost through funding earmarked under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership.

The CEO explained the new machine will help largely on the back end with packaging to speed up the process. He described the equipment as “very complex” and said there have been supply challenges when it comes to microchips and the stainless-steel components.

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"We have also been working with customers on packaging design," he said. "The original timeline had been to have everything installed and ready to go by January of 2022. Now we are looking more at a January install so we are off by a couple of months."

Unlike many of its competitors in other parts of the country, Mann said ADL has not seen any loss of production due to COVID and that has helped them take advantage of the growing feta market.

He said they are already looking at another project to speed up the front end of production. He is expecting to make an announcement on the third phase next year.

Mann expects the growth in feta, and the cheese market in particular, to continue. He noted cheese production already accounts for 85 million of the 120 million litres the company picks up from the farms of its owners each year.

