

SWEET SUCCESS: CRAFT CHEESE MANUFACTURER PIVOTS DURING THE PANDEMIC

ABOUT SWEET GRASS DAIRY. In the early 1990s, Al and Desiree Wehner, fourth-generation dairy farmers in southwest Georgia, decided to try a rotational grazing style of farming that would allow their cows to spend more time out in the pasture. To highlight the quality of the grass-fed milk, Desiree began making cheese and selling it locally. Within just a few months the demand for cheese was so great that they built a small production facility on the farm and “Sweet Grass Dairy,” was born.

In 2001, their daughter and son-in-law, Jessica and Jeremy Little, moved back to Thomasville, Georgia and took over the daily operations of the cheesemaking business. The couple eventually purchased the business from Jessica’s parents and continued to grow it, providing a local, American-made option for those looking to purchase fine cheeses. In 2010, they opened a restaurant in historic downtown Thomasville.

THE CHALLENGE. In January 2020, the company had reached a point where they could no longer take on new accounts due to production capacity in their original facility and Sweet Grass Dairy was planning a move. They were also grappling with how to write a food safety plan that would meet and exceed their current requirements but on a much larger scale. Sweet Grass Dairy contacted GaMEP, part of the MEP National Network™, for help.

MEP CENTER'S ROLE. Hank Hobbs, GaMEP South Georgia region manager, and Wendy White, GaMEP food industry project manager, recommended that Little join the new Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Cohort program that GaMEP was offering. The free cohort was funded through a grant from the National Institute for Standards and Technology’s Manufacturing Extension Partnership (NIST MEP) and would provide food manufacturers with a series of training and coaching sessions. In addition to the cohort program, White worked with the company to ensure their food safety plan met not only the FSMA requirements but those required by third-party and customer audits.

In the midst of this process the COVID-19 pandemic caused a major disruption in the company’s sales model. The company lost its business with restaurants and small retailers almost overnight, which accounted for 78% of overall sales. The Littles decided to shift their business to larger retailers and eCommerce; however, their eCommerce set-up was not designed for the volume and flexibility that they needed to expand this part of their business. White connected the company with Katie Takacs, GaMEP marketing services group manager.

Finally, the company worked with Paul Todd, GaMEP operational excellence group manager, to help reconfigure their packaging room, from packaging and shipping whole wheels of cheese to package their cheese in the smaller formats needed by their new customers.

"GaMEP is a great resource for manufacturing companies. Whether your need is big picture or something small, they can either help or find another resource that can"

-Jeremy Little, Owner

RESULTS



5 jobs created, increasing workforce by 22% since Jan 2020



Increased eCommerce sales by 400% in just 3 months



Implemented a FSMA-compliant food safety plan, which allowed them to pass audits for retailers



Successfully moved from a 4500 sq. ft. facility to a state of the art 12000 sq. ft. facility

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