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Monday, December 11, 2006 · Last updated 11:19 a.m. PT

Wisconsin could lose its cheese title

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COLBY, Wis. -- Wisconsin, which proudly calls itself "America's Dairyland" and embraces all things cheese as a whey of life, is not yet ready to become a second-rate cheese power.

California is poised to take over the crown - or the cheesehead? - as the nation's top cheese producer as early as next year, but Wisconsin cheese lovers say quality is more important than quantity.

"We still have the best cheese," says Mary Deheck, a suburban Milwaukee resident who often makes a special trip to this central Wisconsin cheese mecca to stock up. She buys 100 pounds of cheese per year, typically colby or cheddar, for herself and her daughter, and for gifts.

Last year, California made 2.1 billion pounds of cheese, while Wisconsin produced 2.4 billion, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics. Given the production trend, it is only a matter of time before California becomes the big cheese of cheesemaking.

When the subject of the title change comes up, Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board spokesman Patrick Geoghegan turns up his nose faster than a 5-year-old offered his first slice of Limburger (a pungent cheese made in the U.S. only at a factory in Wisconsin).

Geoghegan says there are much more important numbers than tonnage. For one thing, Wisconsin has about 600 varieties of cheese, compared with California's 250.

Or these: Wisconsin 57, California 7. That's the tally of prizes from the 2006 World Championship Cheese Contest which was held - where else? - in Wisconsin.

"We make the best cheese in the United States and we make some of the best cheese in the world," Geoghegan says. "We don't take a back seat to anybody when it comes to making cheese."

Tourism Department spokesman Jerry Huffman says there are no plans to back down from billing Wisconsin as THE cheese state. After all, he says, "You put a pound of cheddar from Wisconsin next to a pound of cheddar from California and ours is going to taste better, and that's what it's all about."

Nevertheless, Wisconsin's big cheese, Gov. Jim Doyle, has asked the state's commerce and agriculture secretaries to look for ways to help bolster cheese production. Doyle said Wisconsin has to look for new directions and go after niche markets such as organic and specialty cheeses.

"It's about whether we are a leader in a big dairy and cheese industry in this country," he says, "and I am committed to making sure we are."

Cheese is about a \$3.5 billion-a-year industry in Wisconsin. It is such a big deal that Wisconsin residents and fans of the Green Bay Packers, in particular, call themselves "cheeseheads." Thousands of Packers fans wear foam hats that look like big wedges of cheddar.

California's cheese industry is not exactly beating its chest about its accomplishments, or putting down Wisconsin cheese.

"We appreciate what's produced there, but we're also very proud of what's produced here and the way we produce it," says Stephanie Smith, spokeswoman for Cantare Foods, a San Diego producer of Italian cheeses like mozzarella and mascarpone.

It could be that the title of No. 1 cheese state means a whole lot more to Wisconsin than it does to California, which is already the capital of the entertainment industry, the center of the nation's wine industry, the land of fun in the sun, and so on and so on.

Wisconsin, for its part, has cheese, beer, bratwursts, the Packers and ... and ...

George T. Haley, professor of marketing at the University of New Haven in Connecticut, says Wisconsin should consider counteracting California's successful "Happy Cows" ad campaign, which depicts sunny, carefree cows in the state's rolling hills.

One idea is to play up the way many of Wisconsin's dairy farms are family-owned, whereas many of California's dairy farms are larger and owned by corporate entities.

"I think maybe California would be the evil empire and Wisconsin would be the good guys," he says. "That's something that would go over very well."