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Wisconsin's
Tribal Nations
Reclaim Food
Sovereignty
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LOVE *for* LOCAL

Farmers roll with the pandemic punches
amid high demand for food, flowers and more



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Fresh-cut flowers are among the many local items sold at the West Allis Farmers Market.
Photo by Sara Stathas

Find even more online about Wisconsin agriculture, from education to agritourism and more.



Shop in Season

When will your favorite fruits and vegetables be available?
Download a produce calendar showing what's ripe right now.

Read the Digital Magazine

Optimized for Online:

Each article can be read online, as a web article or within our digital magazine.

Share the Content:

Embed our digital magazine in your website to offer compelling information about Wisconsin agriculture to your site visitors.



Stay Informed

Discover facts and stats about agriculture in Wisconsin, including the average farm size and the number of family farms.



Cook With Wisconsin Products

Find tasty recipes using Wisconsin's top products such as cheese and dairy products.



Have a Field Day

Discover agritourism destinations from dairies to farm-to-fork restaurants.



Growing Wisconsin

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Please recycle this magazine.



Greetings,

Thank you for reading the 2021-22 issue of *Growing Wisconsin* magazine. As Secretary-designee of the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), I am proud of our state's \$104.8 billion agriculture industry. This magazine is one way for all of us to read and appreciate the stories of Wisconsin's farms, food processors and agribusinesses.

While Wisconsin agriculture has met numerous challenges before, 2020 was a year like no other as the world faced the COVID-19 pandemic. Rapid changes in consumer preferences and purchases created unprecedented ripples across the food supply chain. Farmers, processors, distributors, stores and restaurants pivoted quickly to adapt and meet the needs of their customers around the world.

This issue of *Growing Wisconsin* shares just a few of their stories. In a time of incredible need, Wisconsin agriculture sought to keep food moving to consumers in many different ways, including through anti-hunger networks. When families and individuals needed food the most, new partnerships formed to keep the supply chain moving and the hungry fed in Wisconsin and our Tribal Nations.

As we reflect on COVID-19 and look forward, it is clear that the connections we have built throughout the pandemic will have a lasting impact. I am proud of the ways we were able to work together with our state's agriculture industry to provide direct support to farmers, food to consumers and resources to agribusinesses. I believe we all have a greater appreciation for the complexity of the food supply chain, and the relationships established will serve us well into the future.

Thank you to all of the essential workers that kept Wisconsin agriculture moving forward during these unprecedented times. Thank you to consumers for showing your support for Wisconsin agriculture through your food purchases. Finally, thank you *Growing Wisconsin* readers for your interest in Wisconsin agriculture.

Sincerely,

Randy Romanski

Secretary-designee

Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection

Wisconsin Agriculture

An overview of the state's food, farming and agribusiness sectors



Wisconsin ranks No. 1 in the U.S. for production of:

- Cheese
- Cranberries
- Snap beans for processing
- Ginseng
- Mink pelts
- Dry whey for human consumption
- Milk goats
- Corn for silage

\$104.8B

Yearly economic impact

435,700

Jobs provided by agriculture, or **11.8%** of Wisconsin's annual state employment



Wisconsin farmland spans **14.3 million acres**, with the average farm size covering **222 acres**. The number of farms in the state totals

64.4K.

The dairy industry itself contributes **\$45.6 BILLION** to Wisconsin's economy each year. The state has **6,845** dairy farms, more than any other state in the nation.



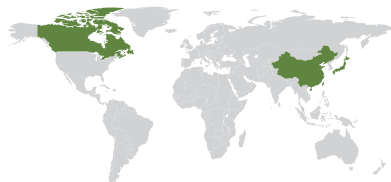
Wisconsin's average dairy herd size is about **170 cows**.

1,613

Number of minority farmers



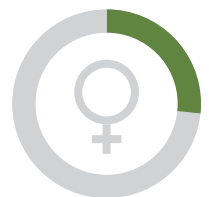
Wisconsin is home to nearly **1,200 licensed cheesemakers** who produce more than 600 types, styles and varieties of cheese – **that's almost double the number of any other state**.



Canada, China and Japan are Wisconsin's top ag export markets.

\$3.37B

In agricultural and food products exported from Wisconsin in 2020 to **145 countries**



On more than **26.7%** of Wisconsin farms, **women** are the principal producers.

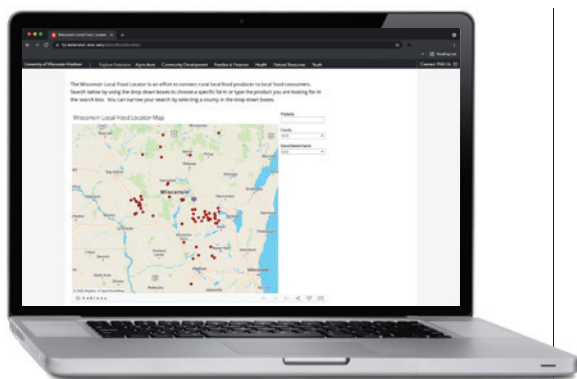
Sources: USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service; Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection

From Farm to Table

Do you ever wonder exactly how your food gets from the farm to your table? There are many steps in the food supply chain that result in the delicious products enjoyed by consumers each day.

Think of the food supply chain as a row of dominoes: A farmer grows or raises the commodity, which is then passed to the processor. The food processor transforms raw ingredients into new products – for example, milling grains into flour or pasteurizing milk before it goes to a distributor. The next step is distribution and, finally, the retail store. The distributor is in charge of sending the product to different stores or retailers where it will be sold. The retailer ultimately sells the product to the consumer.

If any of these pieces of the chain are affected, the entire food supply is affected.



Looking for Local

The University of Wisconsin-Madison is making it easy for the state's consumers to find the best of local Wisconsin products, thanks to a new local food locator tool.

The interactive map connects consumers and producers by allowing users to search by product, farm name or county to find Wisconsin-produced goods. Once a producer is selected, the user also has access to the farm's address, contact information, website, hours of operations and products available.

Learn more and explore the map at fyi.extension.wisc.edu/wilocalfoodlocator.

Safety First

Keeping consumers safe is a top priority across all facets of Wisconsin's agriculture industry. Growers, processors and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) work together to regulate the entire food chain, ensuring everything that ends up on consumers' tables is safe.

Specifically, DATCP's Division of Food and Recreational Safety oversees the inspection of farms, processing facilities and more, as well as the issuing of licenses for those who are in occupations dealing with food safety (for example, lab analysts). The division also supervises several health department inspections of restaurants and recreational businesses, so consumers can rest assured the food supply is safe, wholesome and secure.

Learn more about the food safety efforts of DATCP at datcp.wi.gov.



What's Growing in Wisconsin

A glimpse at the state's leading ag products based on cash receipts*



CATTLE & CALVES \$1.7B

With an inventory of 310,000 head of beef cows, Wisconsin produces 1.9 billion pounds of beef annually.

*WHAT ARE CASH RECEIPTS?

Defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service, cash receipts refer to the total amount of crops or livestock sold in a calendar year.



CORN \$1.4B

Wisconsin farmers harvested 2.97 million acres of corn for grain and 970,000 acres of corn for silage in 2020, which resulted in nearly 516.8 million bushels of corn for silage. Silage refers to fodder that is stored without being dried and gets used for animal feed in winter.



SOYBEANS \$660.9M

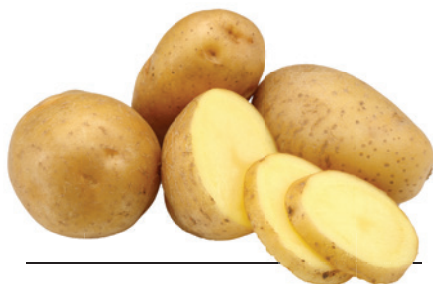
In 2020, Wisconsin's soybean harvest totaled 1.97 million acres and produced nearly 100.5 million bushels of soybeans.

PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: ISTOCK.COM/BTRO160, CRAIGSTOCKS, MICHELLE GUENETTE

POTATOES

\$294.8M

Wisconsin's 2020 potato harvest, which spanned 69,500 acres, resulted in the production of 27.8 million hundredweight of potatoes.



HOGS

\$150M

Wisconsin's hog inventory was 400,000 head in 2020, which is equivalent to 370 million pounds of pork.



BROILERS

\$110.9M

Wisconsin produced a total of 58.5 million broilers (chickens raised for meat) in 2019.



HAY

\$133.4M

Farmers across Wisconsin harvested 1.37 million acres of hay in 2020 – including 840,000 acres of alfalfa – and produced nearly 3.5 million tons of hay.

CRANBERRIES

\$136.5M

Producing 5.5 million barrels of cranberries in 2020, Wisconsin grows cranberries on nearly 20,800 acres across 20 counties. The Badger State produces 61% of the nation's cranberries, making it the top cranberry-producing state in the U.S.



CHICKEN EGGS

\$113.1M

In 2020, Wisconsin produced 2.3 billion table eggs from an average of 7.6 million layer hens.



[Find more online](#)

Learn more about agricultural crops and commodities in Wisconsin online at WIagriculture.com.



DAIRY PRODUCTS & MILK

\$5.7B

Home to 23% of the dairy farms in the U.S., Wisconsin – America's Dairyland – produced more than 30.7 billion pounds of milk in 2020.

A+ Season for Apples

PHOTOS: FROM LEFT: ISTOCK.COM/KRISTEN PRAHL, SUNRISE ORCHARDS

Wisconsin orchards are grateful for a banner year of fruit production

Wisconsin apple growers use the word “fantastic” to describe the 2020 season’s fruit production, sales and customer feedback.

Anna Maenner, executive director of the Wisconsin Apple Growers Association (WAGA), says many of the state’s approximately 300 commercial orchards reported a 25% increase in sales.

Sandy Jeffers agrees. “We had beautiful fruit and lots of it,” says Jeffers, human resources manager at Sunrise Orchards, which produces 22 varieties of apples (up to 150,000 bushels annually) on a 200-acre, third-generation family farm in Gays Mill.

Core Challenges

Like many agricultural producers, in early spring, Wisconsin’s apple growers weren’t sure how 2020 would unfold. Jeffers says Sunrise staff wondered if they’d be able to open their retail shop – which accounts for 50% of sales – during apple season.

“We were most concerned about the safety of our clientele and our employees,” Jeffers says.

Maenner says during a WAGA-sponsored webinar, the presenters advised orchards to discontinue offering samples, limit customers in retail stores and move as many interactions as possible outdoors. After communicating with other WAGA growers, the Sunrise staff developed plans to adjust to the new challenges. Some changes included offering curbside pickup of apples, apple cider donuts and caramel apples; introducing a new, smaller box of apples for mail order; and moving the apples with minor imperfections (but perfect for baking) to a tent outside.

“For the first time in 87 years, we had to limit the number of people inside,” Jeffers says of the Gays Mills store. She says staff wore whimsical shirts bearing mask-wearing apples holding signs that say “We Not Me.”

“People really got a kick out of that T-shirt yet understood our goal of keeping everyone as safe as possible,” she says.

These and other changes, particularly the many opportunities for contactless payment, helped Sunrise enjoy a banner year. “We took real satisfaction in being able to offer people many different ways to get fruit, especially those who needed assistance or who were nervous about being in crowds,” Jeffers says.

A Successful Season

At Ecker’s Apple Farm in Trempealeau, orchard manager Sara Ecker says 2020 yielded their biggest crop ever. She owns and runs Ecker’s with her mother, sister and brother-in-law on land that’s been in their family since 1945.

“I’m the worrywart of the family, so I was very concerned in the early spring about COVID’s effect on our business, but my sister, Jessica, who handles PR and events management, was already thinking about changes for safety and success,” Ecker says.

While the Honeycrisp Hootenanny, Ecker’s annual celebration of apples and bluegrass music, was paused in 2020, beer and hard cider flowed and outdoor concerts continued as guests spread out across the lawn at Hog’s Back Brew Farm, the on-site beer garden. Customers enjoyed the experience of walking out to pick their own apples instead of riding the farm’s John Deere train. The entire shopping adventure moved outside with points of sale at each entrance for caramel apples, honey and caramel apple pies (Mary Ecker, Sara’s mother, bakes and sells more than 7,000 pies a year).

“Our customers had a more positive experience,” she says. As a result, the Eckers plan to implement many of these changes permanently.

Both Jeffers and Ecker say they feel fortunate to have enjoyed a bumper crop, favorable fall weather and the ability to offer customers a safe, outdoor option when many activities and entertainment venues were still closed.

“We are very thankful for our customers and staff,” Ecker says. “They made it a successful season.”

– Kim Hill



Sunrise Orchards shirt



SUPERMARKET SUPERHEROES

Grocery workers across Wisconsin rise to meet safety protocols and health challenges

Along with health care workers, first responders and teachers, the COVID-19 pandemic shined a light on another category of heroes: grocery store workers.

“When grocery stores were named essential businesses among the shutdowns, you saw an amazing

reaction by retailers with no playbook for how to handle this,” says Brandon Scholz, president and CEO of the Wisconsin Grocers Association (WGA). “Grocers’ natural instinct was to protect customers and the workforce, so right away, they started implementing masks, gloves,

distancing floor decals, plexiglass barriers at checkout and sanitizing carts. They had to figure out how to adapt to government mandates like shutting down salad bars and other self-serve stations. Someone still had to serve that, so how did you do it? It was an operational change.”

While many other industries were

forced to tell their employees to stay at home, grocers and grocery store workers had no choice but to adapt. Quickly, Wisconsin stores began shifting hours so that people at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 could come during less crowded times. They also had to shut down stores at night to sanitize and restock what they could, even amid supply chain disruptions and product shortages.

"These people continued to do their jobs," Scholz says. "That often got taken for granted, but they made the necessary changes in their workforce to accommodate others."

Sustaining the Shortage

The shortage of products – including toilet paper and hand sanitizer – won't soon be forgotten, and Scholz says that supply was a massive challenge for grocers throughout the pandemic.

"There were lots of shortages on the manufacturing side of things where they didn't have enough ingredients to make products," he says. "Instead of 22 brands of laundry detergent, now there were only six on the shelves."

Another major disruption occurred in the meat industry. As some meat processors had to temporarily shut down because of challenges brought on by the pandemic, smaller butcher shops worked quickly to try and keep livestock moving through the supply chain. To help grocers connect with suppliers, the Wisconsin Department of Trade and Consumer Protection developed a searchable database that provided store operators with the names of meat processors who had product available to sell.

"It was a really great way to help both parties stay viable and create relationships," Scholz says.

Hope on the Horizon

As COVID-19 vaccination rates continue to rise across the country and in Wisconsin, Scholz says the grocery industry is encouraging its workers to make informed decisions.

"A stable workforce has been a huge challenge over this past year," he says. "I think grocers are going to continue to be diligent on wellness. We won't see plexiglass or social markers coming down for a while."

He adds that the online sale of groceries has continued to grow rapidly, even as the pandemic subsides. Scholz continues to discuss issues like these and others concerning Wisconsin grocers on his podcast, Grocer Cast.

The podcast was initially an idea to help reach a wider audience, but in the days of COVID-19, it became an invaluable resource for the WGA.

"It was an opportunity to

reach a different segment and the next generation of grocery store owners," he says. "Now we're using it to help the transition from 2020 to 2021. Retailers are facing new challenges every day, and we can provide resources."

The WGA also made sure online resources were updated daily with best practices, signage, capacity limits, mask mandates, HR recommendations and anything else retailers needed to know.

"Whatever was relevant to grocers in Wisconsin was all we cared about," Scholz says. "We made sure we were staying relevant and current to help as much as we could."

– Rachel Bertone



BUY Local, BUY Wisconsin



Wisconsin ranks first in the nation in the production of green beans for processing, beets for canning and cabbage for kraut. We rank second in the nation in the production of carrots and peas for processing and third in the production of potatoes, sweet corn and cucumbers for pickles; and are a top-ten producer of onions. Specialty crop production and processing account for \$6.4 billion in annual economic activity and nearly 35,000 Wisconsin jobs!



wisconsinpotatoes.com

HELPING *the* HUNGRY

Wisconsin Food Security Initiative
partners with food distribution
networks to combat hunger statewide

WHEN THE COVID-19

pandemic reached Wisconsin in early 2020, many people struggled with unemployment. In communities across the state, lines at food banks began to grow at an alarming rate as families struggled to keep food on the table. That's why, in May 2020, Gov. Tony Evers launched a Food Security Initiative to help alleviate hunger statewide.

A portion of the funding is helping food banks, pantries and other nonprofit organizations that fight food insecurity adjust to the infrastructure challenges caused by the public health crisis.

"During the COVID-19 pandemic, the critical intersection between agricultural production, the food supply chain and consumers became very clear," says Randy Romanski, Secretary-designee for the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. "The governor quickly recognized our state's food supply chain workers as essential at the onset of the pandemic, and those people never stopped working to produce food for consumers."

Gov. Evers also directed a significant portion of the federal funding provided to Wisconsin through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to help get the state's food products off the farm and into the hands of hungry people. In all, \$25 million of the state's CARES Act funding was invested in the Food Security Initiative, distributed in three rounds over summer and fall 2020.

"In the third round, funding was distributed equally across two of Wisconsin's largest hunger relief organizations – Hunger Task Force and Feeding Wisconsin – who utilized the funds to purchase a variety of Wisconsin-grown products for families in need," Romanski says.



Feeding Wisconsin distributed 79 million pounds of food in 2020.



Hunger Task Force distributes nutritious, Wisconsin-grown food to families in need using a Free & Local food bank model.

Hunger Task Force

Milwaukee-based Hunger Task Force operates on a unique “Free & Local” model, which means it doesn’t charge for the food it distributes and is a local leader in food banking. The organization charges no fees for local pantries for food, delivery or network membership fees and is supported 100% by local community donors who believe in the Free & Local model.

“Hunger Task Force highly values dignity in the work we do,” says Sherrie Tussler, executive director of Hunger Task Force. “We only distribute healthy, nutritious items for hungry children, families and seniors. We believe the food a family experiencing hard times should receive is the same food you or I would give to our neighbor if they needed help.”

This focus on healthy, dignified

food distribution was paramount in Hunger Task Force’s operations during the pandemic, but the importance of supporting local farmers, small businesses, and Wisconsin-grown and produced products was just as critical. Fresh foods are often more difficult to distribute through the emergency food network because of their short shelf life, so families statewide were excited to receive fresh, locally grown food.

Feeding Wisconsin

Based in Madison, Feeding Wisconsin is the statewide association of the six regional Feeding America food banks that provide food to almost 1,000 local food programs in all 72 counties. Together, they distributed 79 million pounds of food in 2020 – an increase of 62% over 2019.

“COVID-19 created many disruptions to our food security network,” says Stephanie Jung Dorfman, executive director of Feeding Wisconsin. “We took exceptional measures to evolve operations rapidly – at an increased cost – to continue to safely distribute meals.”

Food banks and pantries worked together to find solutions to accommodate no-contact, drive-up and walk-up distributions to meet demand. Safety and sanitization measures were implemented along with social distancing among staff and volunteers.

“In the past year, our emergency food system has weathered the perfect storm – increased demand, declines in donations of food and adaptations to our distribution model moving to outdoor, contactless distributions,” Dorfman says. “Through it all, our network of partners was on the front lines ensuring our friends and neighbors don’t have to worry about their next meal. We were happy to support communities across the state as well as our local farmers.”

– Jessica Mozo

“We believe the food a family experiencing hard times should receive is the same food you or I would give to our neighbor if they needed help.”

Sherrie Tussler, executive director of Hunger Task Force



Demand grew for fresh-cut flowers and other farm products at markets like the West Allis Farmers Market.

Rolling With the **PANDEMIC PUNCHES**

Farmers adapt amid high demand for farm products

When the pandemic hit, local food producers across Wisconsin pivoted to online sales, curbside pickup and home deliveries. Open-air farmers markets also increased physical distancing and added measures such as mask wearing and hand sanitizer to deliver wholesome food in a safe manner.

“What we realized during COVID is that Wisconsin has strong food systems,” says April Yancer, the Farm to School and Institution and Wisconsin Foods Program Specialist for the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP). “It proved that our local food systems are nimble and resilient and adapt quite well in emergency situations.”

Direct farm-to-consumer sales take many forms in Wisconsin, from online ordering and curbside deliveries to farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs. At 300 farmers markets across the state, farmers sell fruits, vegetables, meats, cheeses, baked goods and more. Most markets continued to operate during the pandemic, supplying personal protective equipment, honoring distance requirements,



setting attendance limits and offering curbside pickups. Some high-attendance urban markets decentralized with smaller groups of vendors and set up mini-markets within city neighborhoods.

“Markets flexed really well,” says Kristin Krokowski, director of the Wisconsin Farmers Market Association. “They got the recommendations. They evaluated their situation and the guidance that

we put out.” Still, Krokowski says the pandemic had mixed effects on overall sales: “Some markets and many CSAs saw record sales. Other markets struggled.”

Closed Doors, Open Windows

When the pandemic first hit, some of Paul Dietmann’s clients saw their markets vanish overnight. Dietmann co-leads the Emerging Markets Loan Program at Compeer



Financial, where he provides lending opportunities for small farmers who sell directly to consumers and vendors, such as restaurants.

“They ended up retooling their marketing methods and figured out ways to get products to consumers,” says Dietmann, who is also a former deputy secretary and Wisconsin Farm Center Director at DATCP. “It changed the way consumers looked for products as well.”

Dietmann saw many examples of this shift. A client who usually sold meat to Chicago restaurants started selling directly to local residents through an online store and curbside delivery service. A cidery’s tasting room shut down, yet sales flourished for grocery boxes containing raw ingredients for items typically on the menu. A fresh-cut flower farm lost its wedding business but gained customers wanting flowers for cheerful, stay-at-home greetings.

Across the board, sales increased 50% to 100% in 2020 for most of Dietmann’s local food producer clients.

“It was amazing,” he said. “I was really worried because my farmers are so reliant on selling directly to consumers. By and large, they came through in really good shape.”

Lasting Changes

The pandemic prompted a widespread shift toward more frequent use of technology and remote communications, which worked well for some but not all. Ultimately, consumer behavior and expectations will drive the way people access local food moving forward, and farmers will continue to adjust accordingly.

“Farmers have weathered something tremendous here and deserve a ton of credit,” Krokowski says.

– Joanie Stiers



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Reconnecting *the* Web

Tribal Nations build systems for reclaiming their food sovereignty

AS CITIES THROUGHOUT THE

U.S. work to strengthen food and agricultural systems in response to the pressures of the coronavirus pandemic, Wisconsin's Indigenous communities are looking to the wisdom of their ancestors to develop intertribal connections for food sovereignty.

Gary Besaw, a Menominee Tribe member who served 15 years in Tribal Legislature, saw an urgent need to create a sustainable system for accessing nutritious Indigenous foods to address health issues in his community even before the pandemic hit. He helped establish the Menominee Tribal Department of Agriculture and Food Systems (DAFS) three years ago and now serves as its director.

"We decided that if we had an ag department, we could look at trying to bring back some of those truly Indigenous foods that we once had, and we could make sure we knew how those foods were grown and what went into them," Besaw explains. "We also knew that by doing that, we could grow our Tribal economy."

On the home front, the Menominee are developing zoning codes and making training and resources available to increase agriculture and gardening efforts. But they are also seeking to collaborate with Wisconsin's other 10 federally recognized tribes and the state's Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) to reinvigorate the region's Indigenous food web.

Before native people were moved to reservations, Besaw says, his



There are roughly **79,000** Native American farmers and ranchers in the U.S. with total sales of about **\$3.5 billion** per year.

Source: 2017 U.S. Agricultural Census

ancestors traveled seasonally. They harvested wild rice and maple syrup, hunted game, foraged in the forests, cultivated gardens, and fished the lakes and rivers. They also traded goods with other tribes.

Now, the Menominee DAFS is working with Wisconsin's Intertribal Agriculture Council and other groups to advance a new system that will link them with traditional food products, such as fish, bison, corn and apples, that are grown and processed by other Wisconsin tribes. For example, the Menominee recently formed

a partnership with the Oneida Nation, Feeding Wisconsin and DATCP to secure a National Regional Agri Food Distribution Grant from Feeding America. This grant helped pilot a food box program for Tribal Elders. The ultimate goal is to distribute 900 boxes of Indigenous-sourced traditional meats and seasonal produce from late June through November 2021.

"We're eager to understand how we can better support Tribal-led agriculture and supply chain initiatives," says April Yancer, DATCP's Farm to School and Institution Coordinator and Wisconsin Foods Program Specialist. "There are opportunities here for collaboration among multiple governments and agencies. With strong partnerships, we are well-positioned to develop a more equitable food system development that could be replicated."

– Gina Smith

PASSION FOR PORK

Industry, state create initiative to connect producers to processors

In April 2020, farmer Terry Schaefer had three truckloads of pigs ready for market when he received word that the processing plant couldn't take them because of a shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We were able to get one of those trucks out, but we just had to keep feeding the pigs from the other two," recalls Schaefer, co-owner of Double T & D Grain, a family-run finishing operation near Platteville. Unsure if or when large pork processing plants would reopen, "it was a stressful time because we didn't know where we would be from day to day," he says.

He and 11 other pork producers turned to the Wisconsin Pork



Association (WPA), which joined forces with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) to create the Passion for Pork program. This initiative connected pork producers to local meat processors that were able to accommodate the heightened demand for their services. The program created new destinations for pork that might otherwise have gone to waste, according to Keri Retallick, WPA Executive Vice President.

Processing a Plan

Identifying those new destinations fell to Jeff Swenson, DATCP Livestock and Meat Specialist. When a large processing facility in Iowa closed on April 6, 2020, Swenson and Retallick sprang into action to get Passion for Pork up and running.

"I contacted as many meat processors in Wisconsin as I could, in any way I could, to find out if anyone could take extra pigs for processing," Swenson says.

Some small butcher shops added Saturday shifts or extra employees to take on additional hogs for harvest and process the meat into primal cuts.

"Once we got over the labor hurdle with the small butcher shops, the next step was to get the carcasses moved, because the coolers in those small shops aren't big enough to store the extra capacity," Swenson explains.

Primal cuts typically move on to wholesalers, who further process the meat into more popular retail cuts such as pork chops, bacon and brats.

"Many wholesalers had the capacity and welcomed the additional work," says Swenson, noting that these wholesalers normally supply restaurants, university dining halls and other institutional customers that were



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INVENTORY OF HOGS AND PIGS
IN WISCONSIN IN 2020

Eight cuts
of pork meet
the USDA
guidelines
for "lean."

Sources: nass.usda.gov, pork.org

shuttered due to the pandemic.

Those retail cuts were distributed in several ways. In some cases, processors bought it to sell at their butcher shops. In another instance, two Wisconsin FFA chapters in DeForest and Waupaua partnered with WPA to sell Passion for Pork bundles with curbside pickup in their communities. Additionally, the program helped deliver almost 172 tons of pork to food banks throughout the state. Swenson says that equates to 1.83 million 3-ounce servings of freshly produced pork.

To pay for the costs associated with the processing, storage and delivery of the pork to food banks and pantries, WPA accepted donations from the public to support the program's continued operation. In compliance with Wisconsin law, DATCP did not solicit or accept any contributions, but WPA collected more than \$10,000

through this separate fundraising effort, according to Retallick.

For Schaefer, participating in Passion for Pork meant trucking his hogs two and half hours north to Iron Ridge, where Cedar Road Meats, another participant, could take 45 of Schaefer's pigs in each trip. In comparison, a trailer of hogs destined for a large processing facility would hold 170 animals. Even so, Schaefer estimates he sold over 700 hogs through the Passion for Pork program.

"It saved us," Schaefer says of the initiative. "It was enough to keep us going so we didn't have to euthanize any pigs. We were able to keep things rolling."

— Kim Hill

Find more online

For more information about Wisconsin's pork sector, visit Wlagriculture.com.

COOL

When things got tough,
Wisconsin stepped up
for its farmers

Under Pressure

When the nation shut down at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic last year, Wisconsin's farmers were quickly impacted by the economic downturn. Restaurants and schools closed, leading many farmers big and small to lose income from their largest clients.

"Right away, Gov. Tony Evers identified the need to try to help our producers during this really challenging time and to try and get funding to them so that we could

help mitigate some of the potential impacts of COVID-19," says Randy Romanski, Secretary-designee of the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP).

That help came in the form of \$50 million, set aside from the federal funding Wisconsin received through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, to create the state's Farm Support Program. The idea was to have farmers apply for the

grant money to help alleviate the financial challenges presented by COVID-19, whether it be for veterinary bills or paying for feed. But implementing the program came with its challenges: Without a universal list of all farmers in the state, DATCP needed a partner to help administer the funding.

Teamwork Triumph

The department connected the dots with the Wisconsin Department of Revenue (DOR) to help promote



PHOTO: LAURIE J. LAWRENCE / WISCONSIN DATCP

the program and disperse the funds to farmers who needed it. Both departments spread the word through farming groups around the state. They also advertised on the radio and television, and spread the word through social media and news releases.

In the first round, more than 14,500 farmers applied for \$42 million. In the second round, almost 5,000 applied for the remaining \$8 million. In all, the funds were distributed to more than 15,000 farmers in 71 out of Wisconsin's 72 counties.

By partnering with the DOR, the team had access to past tax returns. This data, along with input from multiple groups representing Wisconsin farmers, helped determine metrics and award amounts.

"One of the reasons why DATCP came to us was because we had an immediate source of verified data

and information about farmers in Wisconsin that we know is good, we know is correct and that is relatively complete – tax returns," says Ann DeGarmo, legislative advisor at the DOR.

\$104.8B

**AMOUNT OF MONEY
WISCONSIN AGRICULTURE
BRINGS TO THE STATE'S
ECONOMY EVERY YEAR**

Getting Creative

Customer service agents were on the line walking people through the process, including filling out forms for people who didn't have internet access. One agent even helped a farmer with the form while he was herding cattle.

"Your tax returns only tell a portion of the story. It was really wonderful to be able to hear more from the farmers who were calling us," DeGarmo says. "It was really a pleasure to make this easy and simple for those filing with us."

This was the first time DOR had run a grant program, all while preparing for a tax season with constantly changing deadlines due to the pandemic. Following the success of the Farm Support Program, DOR went on to partner with the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation to distribute CARES Act funds to local businesses.

"COVID-19 has had such a dramatic impact on all of us, and we are all looking forward to seeing us as a state get through this and to have vaccinations continue at the strong pace that they have and work on rebounding," Romanski says.

– Christiana Lilly



THE Comeback CURD

After a rocky start to the pandemic, cheesemakers survive and thrive



Like a lot of agricultural sectors, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic sent shockwaves through the cheesemaking community. Overnight, its largest markets, like restaurants and schools, were shut down. With a surplus of product and low demand, prices tumbled. The benchmark price for mild cheddar, for example, dropped to its lowest level in decades. Luckily, the story doesn't end there – thanks to the nimble response from the state's cheesemakers.

"The extraordinary story in this time of economic distress was the innovations we saw among cheesemakers and other dairy manufacturers as they quickly pivoted to serve new markets," says John Umhoefer, executive director of the Wisconsin Cheese

Makers Association, a nonprofit trade association. "In a difficult year, food production not only survived, it even thrived."

Customer Service Any Way You Slice It

One of those success stories comes from Andy Hatch, owner of Uplands Cheese, which is based in Dodgeville. At first, things looked bleak for the small family-run dairy farm and cheese business. As the restaurants and specialty shops he usually sold to went dark, "we lost about a third of our sales overnight," Hatch says. But then, he noticed something amazing: Customers began to seek him out on the internet instead.

"When our phone stopped ringing, our website started ping-ponging," he says. "Regular

customers who missed our cheese realized they could buy it directly from us. It was a great way to keep cash coming in and to keep our employees busy."

Uplands sells just two types of cheese, Pleasant Ridge Reserve and Rush Creek Reserve, and usually sells around 150,000 pounds of product annually. As the pandemic continued, thousands of website orders began streaming in, forcing the company to pivot from large wholesale orders to smaller requests directly from customers. That created new logistical challenges for the Uplands team.

"Systems that were functional with several dozen orders a week, like creating shipping labels by hand, broke down when we needed to process several hundred orders per week," he says.



Andy Hatch co-owns Uplands Cheese with his wife, Caitlin, and Scott and Liana Mericka.



Throughout the summer, Hatch focused on gaining efficiency in every part of the operation, including managing customer communications, data, packaging, materials and labor. With leaner, more efficient and scalable systems in place, Uplands was ready to handle record-breaking holiday sales in the fourth quarter. “Our 2020 website sales were almost triple what they had been the year before,” he says. The trend has continued into this year. “We’re now processing five times as many website orders as wholesale orders.”

Cheesemakers Look Ahead

Hatch is confident that Uplands will continue to meet customers where they are, especially in light of predictions suggesting that online purchasing will remain strong in

a post-pandemic reality.

“We’ve created a business plan to include growth in online sales, and we’re hoping to receive grant funding that will help us implement that strategy,” he says.

Hatch isn’t alone in adapting to a new kind of future, Umhoefer says.

“It was an unforgettable experience to see the industry remake itself as markets fell, then rose,” he recalls. “Workers quickly adopted ways to stay safe. Customers living in quarantine made it clear that dairy was essential in their diets, and our cheesemakers delivered. Now, cheesemakers in Wisconsin are gearing up to address multiple post-pandemic trends in grocery stores, schools and restaurants. We’re still ready to deliver what people are hungry for.”

– Julie Kendrick



Wisconsin produces **3.37 billion pounds** of cheese each year in over **600** varieties.

1.2K
CHEESE PRODUCERS
IN THE STATE

Source: wisconsincheese.com

Alice *in* Dairyland DELIVERS

Wisconsin's Alice in Dairyland program pivots due to pandemic safety guidelines, looks ahead to its 75th anniversary

Celebrating its 75th year in 2022, Alice in Dairyland (or simply “Alice”) plays an important role in sharing the story of Wisconsin’s \$104.8 billion agricultural industry.

Each year, a new Alice is selected from a group of highly qualified candidates to serve at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) as a full-time spokesperson and ambassador for Wisconsin agriculture. Alice typically travels more than 30,000 miles throughout the state during

her tenure, but the COVID-19 pandemic made that impossible in 2020 and even into 2021.

However, the Alice in Dairyland program turned setbacks into opportunities. As a result, the program has continued to thrive, and its future has never looked brighter.

Adapting Activities

The safety measures taken to stop the spread of COVID-19 made it challenging for 73rd Alice in Dairyland Julia Nunes to engage in many of the activities her

predecessors completed.

Although opportunities for travel, in-person speeches and presentations were limited, Nunes worked with DATCP to ensure her message still reached all corners of the state.

For example, instead of heading to a TV studio, Nunes recorded cooking videos from her parents’ home in Chippewa Falls. She used Wisconsin products in her recipes, and each recording was available on YouTube and promoted on the Alice in Dairyland social media outlets, making the content easily accessible.

“It’s been fun bringing people into my kitchen virtually,” says Nunes, who holds degrees in agricultural communication and marketing and animal science, along with minors in agriculture and food business management and horticulture. “It was an opportunity to show Alice at home, which didn’t really happen before, because in this role, you’re usually always on the go.”

She also recorded a virtual tour of her family’s dairy farm, Scientific Holsteins, and gave viewers a peek at a day in the life of a Wisconsin dairy farmer. In addition, Nunes completed several virtual interviews, including a teatime session with the Ginseng Board of



Alice in Dairyland
Julia Nunes visits with
Doug Amon at Stop and
Smell the Roses in Delavan.

Wisconsin. During the 2020 holiday season, she visited Evergreen Acres in East Troy and recorded herself cutting down the state's first official Christmas tree of the year.

"Usually, Wisconsin schoolchildren come out and watch Alice cut down the Christmas tree, but that wasn't possible in 2020," says Debbie Gegare, DATCP's Alice in Dairyland program manager. "Julia recorded several segments at Evergreen Acres and compiled an hourlong video presentation that schools could share with their students. This is just one example of how she has gone above and beyond to make the most of her time as Alice, despite the challenges that 2020 brought."

In accordance with state and local public health measures, DATCP decided not to hold the Alice in Dairyland finals in 2021, an event that typically draws hundreds of spectators and program supporters. Nunes will remain Alice for another year, making her both the 73rd and 74th Alice. She will pass the torch to the next Alice at the highly anticipated 75th Alice in Dairyland selection event in 2022.

Plans for the 75th Alice

Slated to take place May 19-21, 2022, in Dane County, the 75th Alice in Dairyland finals is expected to be an in-person celebration of the



Julia Nunes was able to conduct some activities, such as a visit to Wetherby Cranberry Co. in Warrens.

program's successful history and bright future.

Current plans indicate that Alice candidates will spend three days in Dane County completing their interviews. Supporters can attend the Friday night question-and-answer session and the finale banquet on Saturday night, where each candidate will share presentations and the 75th Alice will be chosen.

In addition, key events such as Nunes' farewell speech and the 75th Alice selection will be live-streamed and viewable online.

"We're excited to offer the event people have come to know and love

over the years," says Jill Makovec, who served as the 60th Alice in Dairyland and is the chair of the Dane County host committee for the 75th Alice finals event. "We will follow the safety protocols in place at the time and are hopeful our Wisconsin agriculture industry and consumers can join together and celebrate the 75th anniversary of our iconic Alice in Dairyland program."

– Jessica Walker Boehm

Find more online

For tickets and more information, visit aliceindairyland.com.

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