

# The path to SQF Certification ...and the benefits

By Rich Rovito  
Industry Reporter



WISCONSIN MANUFACTURING  
EXTENSION PARTNERSHIP

**Production employees at Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese in Waterloo follow meticulous daily cleaning routines throughout the plant to ensure the safety of the cheese that it produces and packages.**

The routines are part of Crave Brothers' rigorous food safety program, fortified by its recent certification under the Safe Quality Food (SQF) program.

Crave Brothers, which has about 40 employees at the plant, produces fresh mozzarella as its main product. Other items include mascarpone, farmer's rope cheese and queso Oaxaca.

Crave Brothers turned to the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership to assist it in becoming SQF certified.

"We needed a consultant to help us with SQF," said George Crave, who manages the cheese factory. "We hardly understood it. There was a lot of paperwork that needed to be organized. It was one form after another. We were kind of lost about what we needed to do. I just decided that we had to bring in a professional."

WMEP manufacturing specialist Peg Dorn helped lead Crave Brothers down the path to SQF certification. Dorn's background in the cheese industry and her experience as a food safety auditor impressed Crave.

Crave Brothers earned SQF certification about a year ago. The certificate hangs on a wall in a conference room at the plant, located in a rural area of Waterloo, in Jefferson County, across the road from a dairy farm operated by the Crave family that supplies milk to the neighboring cheese plant.



"That is a big breakthrough because new customers always want to know what you have for quality assurance," Crave said. "You can tell them that you are SQF certified. It's a way of attracting new customers, or it keeps them on the phone at first."

SQF is recognized by the Global Food Safety Initiative and retailers and food service providers that demand a stringent, credible food safety management system.

The push toward SQF certification is being driven by customers of companies like Crave Brothers, Dorn said.

"Customers want to see that certificate," she said.

George Crave and his brothers Charles, Thomas and Mark form the management team at Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese. Raised on a 40-cow dairy farm near Beloit, the Craves purchased the Waterloo dairy farm in 1980.

George is a licensed cheese maker, Charles handles administration and bookkeeping, Tom oversees crop production and Mark serves as the farm's general manager. Their father, 86-year-old Bob Crave, still contributes daily labor and expert woodworking to the farm and dairy operation.



Melissa Houfe, Quality Assurance Manager and George Crave

George's wife, Debbie, is also involved in the operations, as are Charles' daughter-in-law, Beth Crave, and three members of a younger generation of the Crave family – Jordan, Andrew and Patrick.

The dairy farm and cheese plant operate as separate entities, but the farm is essential to the operation of the cheese plant. Every pound of cheese that is produced by Crave Brothers is made with milk from the family's 2,200-head herd. The milk is transported from the farm to the cheese plant through a system of underground pipes.

**The SQF program is designed to prevent contamination of food products and provides a pro-active measure concerning food safety, George Crave insisted.**

"We had to decide if we wanted to see if things were clean before we started making product or do we wait and test product until it tells us it wasn't clean," he said. "I wanted to know if it's clean before we start."

During the certification process, Dorn held on-site meetings at Crave Brothers every other week for three to four hours at a time.

"What jumped out at me was the commitment," Dorn said. "You don't always get that. Management commitment is, in my opinion, one of the most important things when it comes to SQF, or anything, for that matter. Their commitment made my job a lot easier."

It took about one year for Crave Brothers to complete the necessary work to become SQF certified, Dorn said.

“We essentially worked through the code,” she explained. “We would write a plan and then train everybody in the plant on that plan.”

During the process, Dorn worked closely with Mellisa Houfe, Quality Assurance Manager at Crave Brothers.

“The important thing was that Mellisa and Peg worked very well together,” Crave said. “There were so many documents that had to be created. We went through them and personalized them for us. You just can’t cookie-cutter it.”

Crave Brothers and the WMEP forged a strong relationship during the process.



**Every pound of cheese that is produced by Crave Brothers is made with milk from the family’s 2,200-head herd. The milk is transported from the farm to the cheese plant through a system of underground pipes.**

“The WMEP was always very willing to help,” Houfe said. “If I had questions, they would always get right back to me.”

Regular, in-person meetings at the plant turned out to be crucial to the process.

“You could hire a consultant in California and they could write the procedures for you and send them to you but they don’t work for you,” Dorn said. “I’m local. I was able to come in and get to know everybody and get to know the culture and realize what will work and what won’t.”

Much of the focus of SQF comes down to proper documentation and making necessary improvements, Dorn said.



“The SQF code is very specific on what you have to have,” she said. “Most of these things Crave Brothers already had but we had to get them into the right format, basically. Some things we had to create fresh, like business continuity. That’s something that’s pretty unique.”

Going through the SQF certification has transformed Crave Brothers, Dorn said.

“I think the company is more deliberate as far as what needs to be done ahead of time just to prevent things from happening. I think they are more well-prepared,” she said. “You have to have plans in place.”

Having company management and employees embrace the changes is key, she said.

“So much of this depends on the staff doing it and buying into it,” Dorn said. “Crave Brothers has a good staff. They understand it. They care.”

Having a formal food safety program is crucial to the long-term viability of the business, Crave said. Failing to be prepared can have devastating consequences.

In May, Crave Brothers was among eight family businesses honored at the Wisconsin Family Business of the Year Award banquet held in Madison. Crave Brothers won the Grand Award for medium-size companies.

“The resilience and creativity of the family businesses we see is remarkable,” said Julie Bogle, lead partner in the family business practice at Smith & Gesteland, a Middleton accounting and consulting firm and the award’s founding sponsor. “They are the cornerstones in their communities.”

Earlier in the year, Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese earned two Best of Class Awards in the 2017 U.S. Championship Cheese Contest for its fresh mozzarella and jalapeño cheddar cheese curds.



“It validates what we are doing,” Crave said. “You go to the consumer and say we have farm fresh milk and it’s award-winning cheese. You might as well pound your chest when you can because there is plenty of competition out there. We’re just a small player. The only thing we have to sell is quality.”

In addition to its increased focus on food safety, Crave Brothers also has implemented sustainability programs in its operations, including the use of a methane digester on its farm.

“We are using the volatile gas, or methane, as fuel,” Crave said. “Methane is a highly combustible natural gas produced by anything that is decaying. A pile of orange peels in your back yard in a compost cage is producing methane.”

Crave Brothers uses two large, 750,000-gallon fermentation tanks that are heated to 105 degrees, the ideal temperature for the maximum microbial development population that rapidly decomposes the biomass, creating methane gas. The methane vapor is captured and transformed into electricity.

“We produce enough electricity to power the farm, the cheese factory and about 300 additional homes in our township,” Crave said.

“We don’t burn off the manure, just the volatile gases,” Crave said. “The solids come out and go through a big press. Liquids come out of the screens and go into a 10 million-gallon tank that we use for fertilizer. That goes back to grow our crops.”

Smaller fibers get dried and turned into bedding for the dairy cows.

“All of the waste goes back into something,” Crave said. “Farmers are the original recyclers.”