

Eat, Drink, and Be Prosperous

A Short History of the Food and Beverage Industry in the Milwaukee Region – the seven counties of Southeastern Wisconsin

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Southeastern Wisconsin grew up at the intersection of industry and agriculture. Fertile soil, inviting harbors, and a young, enterprising citizenry virtually guaranteed that Milwaukee and its neighbors would develop economies that blended ambition and innovation with strong ties to the land. That blend produced a vibrant food and beverage industry, one that has evolved through a series of well-defined stages without losing its central place in the region's economy.

In the first generation of white settlement—from the pioneer land sales of the 1830s through the Civil War of the 1860s—the relationship between the lakeshore cities and their food-producing neighbors was a simple matter of transportation. Milwaukee, Racine, and Kenosha shipped out the crops that nearby farmers brought in, whether those farmers were traveling from the edge of town or from the farthest reaches of Waukesha, Washington, Ozaukee, and Walworth Counties. More often than not, their wagons were piled high with grain, particularly wheat. As the upper Midwest became the nation's grain belt, southeastern Wisconsin prospered accordingly. By the early 1860s, Milwaukee, whose harbor advantages were unmatched in the region, had become the largest shipper of wheat on the planet, and the Grain Exchange, whose second home is now one of the city's most elegant spaces, influenced the price of farm commodities internationally.

As the region matured, processing replaced shipping as its economic lifeblood. The mutual dependence of city and country was as strong as ever, but urban workers *processed* the food crops that their agricultural counterparts produced; they added the value at home rather than transporting the state's bounty to eastern markets. Flour was the first processed agricultural product. Whether in the heart of Milwaukee or in hopeful young settlements like Burlington, Oconomowoc, and Cedarburg, mills sprang up wherever a river or creek could be harnessed

productively. Water power, in fact, was the genesis of scores of towns in the region—a pattern immortalized in names like Menomonee Falls, Whitewater, and West Bend. In 1854, just eight years after the city received its charter, flour was Milwaukee’s most important product. By 1870, local output had risen to 1.2 million barrels, and the city trailed only St. Louis as a milling center.

As wheat was turned to flour, livestock from the region’s farms created two complementary urban industries: tanning and packing. Tens of thousands of hogs and cattle streamed into Milwaukee for processing every year. Their hides, especially cattle hides, went to tanneries, which by 1890 had made their hometown the largest producer of plain tanned leather on earth. Packing plants converted the rest of the animal into meat—both pork and beef—for hungry Americans far beyond the borders of southeastern Wisconsin. The number of hogs butchered in Milwaukee soared from 32,221 in 1854 to 310,913 in 1872, when the city ranked fourth in the nation, behind Chicago, Cincinnati, and St. Louis. John Plankinton was the guiding light of the local industry, and he took on a succession of distinguished partners—Frederick Layton, Philip Armour, and Patrick Cudahy, all of whom would find singular success as heads of their own packing houses.

The Menomonee Valley was the region’s great meat center until 1895, when Patrick Cudahy, a native of Ireland, founded a village on the south lakeshore and named it for himself. His plant was soon doing most of southeastern Wisconsin’s packing, and railcars filled with bacon, ham, lard, salt pork, and sausage left its sidings every day. Although the village became a diversified industrial stronghold, Cudahy’s original seal was described in 1901 as “a crowned porker rampant on a field azure encircled by a wreath composed of sausage links.”

Given the enormous number of Germans in the local population—they were the region’s largest ethnic group well before the Civil War—it was hardly surprising that Milwaukeeans would produce some of

America's best wurst. Frederick Usinger, who arrived in 1881, was an early success story, but families like the Weisels and, in later years, the Klements would burnish Milwaukee's reputation as a capital of fine sausage.

Another source of protein was readily available in Lake Michigan. From the 1870s into the 1920s, Jones Island—actually a peninsula at the Milwaukee River's mouth—supported a sizable colony of commercial fishing families, most of them from the Baltic seacoast of Poland. The Kaszubs, as they were called, numbered nearly 1,600 at the turn of the twentieth century, and they netted nearly two million pounds of fish in a good year—a mixed catch that might have included trout, whitefish, perch, herring, sturgeon, and chubs. Whether fresh, smoked, or pickled, the harvest of the Island's fisherfolk was enormously popular in the region, supporting a tradition that is still going strong: the Friday night fish fry. Port Washington remained a commercial fishing center long after Jones Island's heyday had passed, with an unusual specialty. In the 1920s, Port Washington's fishermen shipped as many as twenty-six tons of whitefish caviar to epicures across the country every year.

Wheat, livestock, and fish were all mainstays of the region's economy. Finally and most famously, barley and hops grown on southeastern Wisconsin farms supported a robust brewing industry. Barley had to go through the intermediate step of malting before it was ready for the kettle. The grain was sprouted and then dried, providing the sugar that brewer's yeast transformed into carbon dioxide and alcohol—the bubbles and buzz associated with beer from antiquity. Milwaukee became a malting center of global importance, the home of companies established by the Froedtert, Krause, Kurth, Borchert, and Riebs families—all of them German by birth or ancestry.

The brewers who used all that malt became household words internationally. Milwaukee's pioneer brewer—a Welshman, ironically—tapped his first keg of ale in 1840, but a German-owned lager plant went

into production only a year later. By 1856, there were twenty-six breweries in Milwaukee. Most were barely micros by modern standards, but their proprietors had names like Schlitz, Miller, Blatz, and Best—the family into which Frederick Pabst would marry. Pabst was America’s largest brewery by 1874, and Schlitz and Blatz were in the top dozen. Barely out of its pioneer period, Milwaukee became a brewer of national significance.

Competition among the major producers lifted all to greater heights. By 1885 there were only nine breweries left in Milwaukee, but they produced twenty times more beer than the much larger number in business two decades earlier. In 1890, for the first and only time in the region’s history, beer was Milwaukee’s most important product by value added. The metal-bending industries would soon overtake the “amber nectar,” but mining shovels and concrete mixers were hardly consumer products. Brewers, by contrast, relied heavily on mass advertising to reach their markets. In the 1890s, Schlitz began to call itself “The Beer That Made Milwaukee Famous”—a slogan that has long outlived the brewery. The result of such non-stop promotion was that Milwaukee earned a reputation as “the beer capital of the world” that endures to the present day. Although Milwaukee was the leading producer, beer could be found in the region wherever there were Germans to make it and Americans (German or otherwise) to drink it. From Fox Head in Waukesha to Lithia in West Bend, southeastern Wisconsin was the home of dozens of fondly remembered local brews.

Beer was not the only regional beverage that became an industry in its own right. Waukesha was nationally celebrated for the quality of its water, unfiltered and unadulterated. In 1868, Richard Dunbar, a Washington, D.C. resident who suffered from diabetes, came to Waukesha for his mother-in-law’s funeral and happened to drink from a local spring. When his symptoms disappeared, Dunbar declared himself cured and gave all the credit to Waukesha’s water. The Irishman soon

bought the spring and proceeded to share its medicinal properties with all comers. Part missionary and part showman, Dunbar virtually promoted a resort industry into existence. Extravagant claims and first-class hotel facilities drew thousands of patrons from the affluent East and the sultry South during the summer months. They could “take the waters” at any of fifty-two named mineral springs in the city of Waukesha. Known as “The Saratoga of the West” after New York’s famed spa, Waukesha hosted such luminaries as Mary Todd Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant. The crowds kept coming until the late 1800s, when changing tastes and a more skeptical public brought an end to the age of instant miracles.

Bottled Waukesha water remained popular well into the twentieth century, and there was a steady stream of other entrepreneurs who turned the region’s liquid wealth into soda water. Waukesha was the home of the Bon Ton, White Rock, and Roxo labels, and John Graf of Milwaukee became one of the region’s most successful bottlers. “Grandpa Graf” advertised his soft drinks for decades as “The Best What Gives.” At the other end of the spectrum were distillers who satisfied the region’s thirst for strong drink. The leaders included the Meadow Springs Distillery, whose employees made whiskey and gin in a plant on the north side of the Menomonee Valley at Twenty-seventh Street. Local consumers snapped up the by-products of Milwaukee-area distilleries, including vinegar, spent grain (for cattle feed), and yeast.

A different sort of beverage spawned multiple industries. In the late 1800s, as wheat exhausted Wisconsin’s soils and the crop migrated west to Minnesota and the Dakotas, the state’s farmers turned gradually to dairying as their specialty. Year by year, fields once covered with wheat as a cash crop sprouted corn, oats, and hay as feed crops. After fifty years of experimentation, Wisconsin embraced a new and lasting identity as America’s Dairyland. Waukesha was known as “Cow County” for the quality and size of its herds, but dairying became a way of life

throughout the region. The dairy cow proved to be a remarkably versatile animal, providing milk, butter, cheese, and ice cream, among many other products, and when their useful lives were over, culled dairy cows became an important source of both beef and leather.

Southeastern Wisconsin's fluid milk was shipped directly to urban centers, particularly Chicago and Milwaukee, but much of the supply was never intended for drinking. Crossroads cheese factories sprouted all over the countryside, some growing to become regional and even national enterprises. There were more specialized applications in a number of towns, including milk-condensing plants in Oconomowoc, West Bend, Delavan, and Elkhorn. One of the most successful dairy innovations was malted milk, patented by William Horlick of Racine in 1883. By adding malted barley and wheat flour to powdered milk, Horlick developed a concoction that was both nutritious and flavorful, earning him the gratitude of soda fountain proprietors all over America. As other producers entered the field, southeastern Wisconsin became the malted milk capital of the country. Local entrepreneurs developed a reputation for fine ice cream as well, with the Luick and Blommer families leading the way.

Malted milk and ice cream were fitting products for a region with a legendary sweet tooth. A small army of confectioners did their part to satisfy the communal craving, including Otto Schoenleber, who founded Ambrosia Chocolate in 1894, and George Ziegler, whose Giant chocolate bars were a favorite for generations. By 1900 the Ziegler firm was known as "the largest in its line west of Philadelphia." Robert Johnston ran a king-sized cracker factory on Milwaukee's South Side, later adding cookies to his product line. There were hundreds of smaller bakeries in the region, many of them specializing in European treats, from Danish *kringle* in Racine to German *kaffeekuchen* in West Bend. A number of local bakers, including Oswald Jaeger and Michael Carpenter of

Milwaukee, graduated from modest storefronts to industrial plants that served hungry customers throughout the region.

Although the food and beverage industry played a central role in the region, it was often overshadowed by manufacturing. Milwaukee did proclaim itself “The Machine Shop of the World,” but the distinction between the two economic sectors was never as sharp as it might have appeared. Manufacturing, in fact, was heavily oriented to food and beverage production in southeastern Wisconsin. Not only were there glass factories and bottle-washers for the breweries, but manufacturers turned out flour-milling machinery, malting apparatus, industrial refrigeration systems and, above all, agricultural equipment. Giants like J.I. Case of Racine, Allis-Chalmers of West Allis, and International Harvester of Milwaukee were among the largest producers of farm machinery in the world. And then there were manufacturers who served cooks rather than farmers, including Milwaukee’s own National Enameling and Stamping Company, a firm better-known by its initials: NESCO.

Although manufacturing was its leading source of employment by the late 1800s, Milwaukee was still identified in the popular imagination as a brewing capital. The beer barons were temporarily dethroned during Prohibition, the long national drought that lasted from 1919 to 1933. Forced to explore alternative lines of business, most of them made soft drinks, malt syrup, malt tonic, and near beer, while Schlitz produced chocolate bars and Pabst embraced dairy products. The Pabst family had developed a pedigreed Holstein herd on their sprawling farm outside Oconomowoc, and milk from those cows was turned into a processed cheese called Pabst-ett. Distillers, too, had to find other ways to earn a living. The old Meadow Springs distillery in the Menomonee Valley elevated a traditional by-product to the top of the line, and the firm changed its name accordingly—to Red Star Yeast. Despite the general distress of the Depression, the end of Prohibition in 1933 was greeted

with unadulterated joy in Wisconsin, and innovations like canned beer in 1935 restored the brewing industry's head. In the years after World War II, Milwaukee was the home of three of the nation's four largest brewers: Pabst, Schlitz, and Miller.

World War II boosted the demand for virtually all southeastern Wisconsin products, both durable and perishable, but the conflict had an unexpected impact on one important segment of the food industry. The fertility of the soil and the proximity of urban markets had made the region a leading producer of vegetables for the table. Canneries employed hundreds of local residents in Hartford, Oconomowoc, Merton, Whitewater, Belgium, and a number of other inland cities. Some packed crops like peas, green beans, sweet corn, and beets, while others turned cucumbers into pickles and cabbage into sauerkraut. As men went off to war and women took jobs in defense plants, a severe labor shortage threatened both the crops and the canneries. The emergency was met with help from German prisoners of war, who were interned by the hundreds in government camps throughout the region. Working side by side with American citizens, many of whom were German by ancestry, a number of POWs developed cordial relations with their former enemies.

The forces that have transformed the food and beverage industry since World War II are familiar to anyone who reads the newspaper. Globalization, consolidation, and computerization have affected the industry as profoundly as they have affected all industries, and there has been a steady procession of departures and arrivals. Flour-milling is gone, the great packing houses have moved elsewhere, and the major breweries are represented only by MillerCoors, which makes Pabst and Schlitz products as well. But the food and beverage industry still lies close to the region's heart, both culturally and economically. The state's two marquee sports teams are the Brewers and the Packers. Beer and bratwurst are fundamental to southeastern Wisconsin's image—as is cheese, often in the form of foam headgear. And where but Milwaukee

would a major-league baseball team entertain its fans with sausage races at every home game?

Its cultural impact is self-evident, but the food and beverage industry has retained its economic clout as well. Cheese is still made in southeastern Wisconsin, barley is still malted, meat is still packed, vegetables are still canned (and frozen), fish are still caught, beer is still brewed, chocolate is still processed, and sausage is still turned out in prodigious quantities. The commodity side of the business remains vital, and there has been a concerted effort to move toward the higher-value end of the market as well, toward products that are more sophisticated, more specialized, more technology-driven. Without losing its importance as a source of basic products, the region has become a world-class supplier of everything from soy sauce to seasonings and from dessert toppings to flavors and fragrances.

With such a highly developed food and beverage culture—and such a rich tapestry of ethnic groups—it was perhaps inevitable that Milwaukee would become a great restaurant town. A memorable meal is often just around the corner, and the culinary choices are multiplied throughout the region. On the production side of the table, and rising from the same cultural soil, Milwaukee has become a national capital of the Grow Local/Eat Local movement. Community gardens, organic producers, and champions of sustainability like Growing Power have introduced a new generation to one of the region's historic strengths.

From the earliest days of statehood, southeastern Wisconsin has helped to satisfy the hunger and thirst of consumers all over the world. The food and beverage industry blossomed naturally in a place where there was an abundance of good soil, fresh water, skilled labor, and a steadfast commitment to a high quality of life. Those advantages, both physical and cultural, still shape the region's character, and they continue to shape the food and beverage industry as well. Firmly planted,

highly productive, and endlessly adaptable, the industry is well-positioned to grow a promising new future from the deep roots of its past.