Suggested headline

***Eight decades offering cheese and cheer***

**By Bill Barth and Stephanie Klett**

Zbigniew “John” Borowiec and his wife Cheri could have been cast in Hollywood as the proud proprietors of a mom-and-pop deli.

Both are clad in black head-to-toe, matching shades of gray in their hair, quick broad smiles and so comfortable they finish each other’s sentences.

Welcome to the venerable Cheese Box, 801 S. Wells St. in Lake Geneva, one of the community’s most iconic shops. It has occupied this corner lot for more than 80 years. The Borowiecs acquired the property in 2013 from Ed and Lesle Schwinn, who had operated it for two decades. There was a serendipitous element to the deal.

Johnny B, as he is known, and Cheri were looking for a new opportunity. On a drive into Lake Geneva they passed by and saw a “For Sale” sign. They looked at each other, began a conversation, then made contact to open negotiations. The history and heritage appealed to them.

“We wanted to keep it as much the same as we could,” Cheri told us. “It’s very iconic. Sometimes 80-year-old people come in here and say ‘My grandpa took me here.’ It’s wonderful to hear the stories.”

Their experience in the food business runs deep. Johnny B came to America from Poland with his family at age 3, crossing the Atlantic on a ship and transferring through famed Ellis Island. The family settled in Chicago, which has the largest Polish population outside Warsaw. His first job was at the Kingsbury Grill on the Chicago River. He met Cheri when they worked together at a deli near Northwestern University.

Their growing family eventually relocated to Wisconsin and an opportunity arose to open a restaurant in Genoa City. There, Johnny B’s Home Plate was born. They operated the restaurant for 12 years.

Johnny B’s Home Plate “was a family place with an ice cream soda fountain,” Cheri said. “It was wonderful. A great experience, but very tough. I didn’t really want to have a restaurant again, but both of us loved the customer service and the food business.”

The Cheese Box fit. It’s deli-style, with carryout products rather than dine-in, although there are comfortable outdoor picnic tables for use during good weather. Though the building is large, the retail space is smaller. Don’t be fooled, though. It’s packed with unique and tasty treats, from wonderful Wisconsin cheeses to hand-made sandwiches, cookies, potato salad, soups and more.

Our favorite is roast beef and cheddar. Made for the gods. And we’ll be back to try the award-winning white chicken chili and lobster bisque.

Not to mention, when the spirit moves him, Johnny B fires up the Oklahoma Joe smoker for ribs, brisket and, especially, smoked salmon.

From April to October visitors can patronize Cheese Shop Too, with a more limited but tasty menu of products, at The Riviera downtown.

There’s also a busy catering side to the business, operated by daughter Alyx and her husband Nate Barkwill. The shop ships cheese boxes across the country.

It all happens with a commitment to the shop’s history and Wisconsin’s famous heritage with cheese. The interactions with customers is what makes the Cheese Box owners happy.

“We pride ourselves on the customer service side of the business,” Cheri said. “We’re a small mom-and-pop place and we want people to have that welcome feeling here, that they’re going to be treated a certain way, that they’re going to find what they’re looking for. It’s one of the key elements that keeps us going.”

“I like to turn people in the direction of Wisconsin cheddars and curds,” Johnny said. “We’re known for the quality of our curds here. And our aged Wisconsin cheddars.”

They enjoy teaching visitors about cheese. Folks go to the grocery store and look for mild cheddar or sharp cheddar. Mistake.

“A lot of people come in asking for sharp cheddar, medium cheddar. I tell them we don’t go by that,” Cheri explained. “We go by the age of the cheese. It’s much more definitive and you know what you’re getting better.”

The oldest cheese they carry is 15 years. That’s not a misprint. Typical, and most popular, is cheese aged 4-5 years.

Cheri also explains that if you eat your cheese right out of the refrigerator you’re doing it wrong.

“Eat cheese at room temperature,” she said. “If you eat cold cheese you’re not going to get your money’s worth, or the best out of the cheese. It’s funny how many people come back and say ‘Oh, my God, you were so right. We eat our cheese at room temperature now and enjoy it so much more’.”

Most of their products are Wisconsin-made and often locally-sourced. They use Lake Geneva Country Meats and Kettle Moraine Honey. More than 90% of the cheese comes from Wisconsin. They carry Wisconsin wines like Spirits of Norway. And they sell original Foamation cheesehead hats.

The people they meet matter most.

“I love engaging with people when they come in,” Johnny told us, suggesting Wisconsin’s cheese history is a significant attraction. “People are drawn to us, in a sense. Sometimes they’ll tell us all about their life.”

There’s a certain satisfaction in experiencing this kind of touchstone with Wisconsin’s history. The Borowiecs hold fast to tradition. It feels right.

Tastes right, too.

*Bill Barth is the former Editor of the Beloit Daily News and a member of the Wisconsin Newspaper Hall of Fame. His wife, Stephanie Klett, is the President and CEO of Visit Lake Geneva, and the former Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Tourism.*