

# cheese to please

Special touches, great products help Casa Anna owner carve unique niche in Fond du Lac business community

**Name:** Cindy Blank

**Age:** 50

**Years in the community:** All but about three, and then she returned. Casa Anna Cheese Shop celebrates 11 years in Fond du Lac in November.

**Occupation:** Owner/operator of Casa Anna Cheese Store, opened in 1999

**Location:** 204 W. Division St.; [www.casaannacheese.com](http://www.casaannacheese.com)

**Reaction to being selected for a Success section story:** "I am honored that somebody feels I made a difference in the community and feels my business is a success."

**To what do you owe your measure of success?** "My upbringing. My parents worked hard—and still do—and instilled that in us. Determination — that it is going to work no matter what. And community; the community has embraced the store."



**MONICA WALK**  
Special to The Reporter

Casa Anna Cheese Store owner Cindy Blank displays cheese samples in the showroom of her store at 204 W. Division St.

## The Reporter photos by Patrick Flood

It started with a bag of cheese curds.

Technically, nacho cheese, salsa and chips came first — but the cheese curds provided the "light bulb moment" for Casa Anna Cheese Store owner Cindy Blank.

Blank was an entrepreneur before she opened the retail cheese shop 11 years ago. Friendship with the owner of Kara Foods, the Fond du Lac-based manufacturer of Mexican snack foods, had inspired Blank to create a business providing tortilla chips, nacho cheese and salsa to stores up and down the Fox River Valley.

Her Casa Anna line of snacks — a reference to her middle name, Ann — was doing well in a grow-

ing number of stores. During a delivery to a local Pick 'n Save store, Blank was asked if she could get cheese curds for the store.

With husband Lewis Blank "working in cheese his whole life," the answer was an easy, "Sure."

So, Blank added cheese curds to her route. Then she began providing cheese for grocery delis: cutting, packaging, boxing, and driving and delivering the cheese herself. She included Italian cheese items from Fond du Lac's Park Cheese, her husband's employer, which shipped most of its product to the East Coast and did not have a local outlet.

"It was a five-day-a-week thing," Blank recounted. "Every week, you go take the order. Then, two

days later you bring the order back. You stock the shelf. It was going really good."

### Meeting her customers

While in stores and stocking shelves, Blank realized that she never really saw who bought her products.

She looked around and saw that Fond du Lac no longer had a true cheese store since the closure of the Tolibia shop on Scott Street, and she was aware that people would stop in the Park Cheese wholesale office looking to make purchases.

She also was aware of a small, empty storefront on Division Street, attached to the Park Cheese storage buildings. Blank could recall going to the shop in the 1970s and '80s with her mother to buy cheeses and cold meats.

One day, Blank told her husband she wanted to open that old storefront as a cheese store.

The couple started the business with their own money, painting walls and leasing coolers before opening for business as Casa Anna Cheese Store/Fresh Pizza on Nov. 21, 1999. They kept the Casa Anna name, which had earned recognition during Blank's grocery store stocking days.

"We didn't know what we were in for," Blank laughed. "That first Christmas was crazy. We were blown away by the business. I thought, 'My gosh, what did I do?'"

### Growing the business

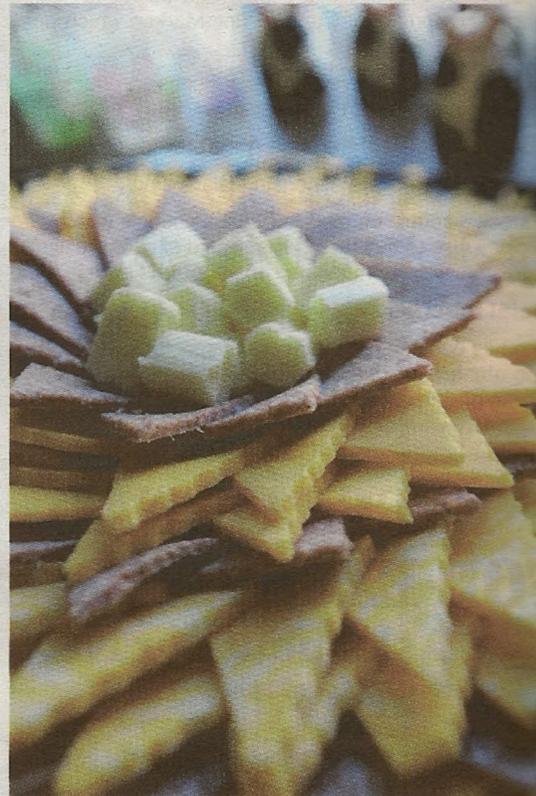
Learning came from the rough spots.

"I learned people want to look at things, so I have boxes with prices," she said of the busy holiday season, for which she already is preparing fliers in October. "Every year we grow and add new products. Christmas is the busiest time of year, by any means. Those three weeks are gone in a flash. People don't shop early for Christmas gifts if it's cheese."

At the beginning, Blank cut and packaged the cheese as customers ordered it. Today, that holiday work is done before December arrives. And Blank now is able to carry an inventory supplied by vendors, while in the early days she used to drive to suppliers herself to load her van with the cheese she needed — and could afford — to stock.

Since Day 1, she has offered shipping of gifts for customers, using Federal Express at Christmas and the U.S. Postal Service the

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TOP: Cindy Blank poses in front of her popular cheese shop at W. Division St. MIDDLE: Cheese and sausage trays like this one popular among Casa Anna customers. BOTTOM: Casa Anna Cheese Store owner Cindy Blank displays packages of cheese curds, one of the products that makes the shop locally famous.

The Reporter photos by Patrick Flood

## Family feels 'at home' working at Casa Anna

MONICA WALK Special to The Reporter

When Cindy Blank's daughter arrived from Utah to help run Casa Anna Cheese Store during last year's holiday season, she was returning to an old role.

The Blanks had two teens at home when the cheese shop opened, and both were required to work daily. That's because Casa Anna really is a family business, even if Cindy's face is the one most frequently visible in the shop.

Now that the Blanks' children are grown, younger nieces and nephews are being welcomed into the store to learn about customer service and good work habits. Blank's siblings also drop in, and step in to help when needed.

"It puts you in a different atmosphere, with family," Blank noted, "a different bonding experience."

"My parents, Chuck and Ann Hess, are here pretty much every day," Blank smiled. "My dad is in his 70s and he'll go to the post office for me, cut labels. He'll pack cheese 'til the sun comes up if I let him."

She added, "My mom helps, too. She makes pizzas and talks to people. My mom is called 'Casa Anna Mom' all the time, and she and my dad hand out pizza coupons and tell people, 'Go see my daughter.' They are my best advertising."

Her parents also volunteer in the community. In fact, both parents have been nominated for Cheers for Volunteers, and Ann Hess was honored as volunteer of the year in 2010.

"I learned my work habits from them," Blank said.

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rest of the year.

"I'm not big on raising prices," she said, noting she hasn't made changes in two years. "I'm not out to get rich, but to provide a good product and to make people happy coming here."

Customers are welcomed by cheese samples atop the cooler, often the Wisconsin specialty of cheese curds, which many travelers have not encountered before. Curds are a big seller with those visitors and with homesick former Wisconsinites now living elsewhere.

### Wisconsin favorites

Other favorites include Cheddar, Cojack, Pepperjack, Widmer's Brick and Long cheese, which Blank carries in five varieties: Mozzarella, Pepperjack, smoked, whips and Provolone.

The Bella Vitano line — made by Sartori in Plymouth with flavors that include peridot, raspberry ale, black pepper and balsamic — is a big seller and often bought by customers of Cujak's Wine Market, which pairs the cheeses at wine tastings.

As the sole local purveyor of Park Cheese products, Blank is pleased to carry several award-winning aged Provolone.

About 99 percent of the Casa Anna stock is produced in the state.

"I want to represent Wisconsin," Blank said.

"I stock a couple of imports because people watch cooking shows and there is no place else to buy them," Blank said of cheeses like Manchego, Ementhaler, Gruyere, Pecorino Romano and an imported Havarti.

### Special touches

She has become a shopkeeper of special touches: keeping paper plates and plastic utensils on hand to give to picnicking visitors who want to enjoy their purchase on the shore of Lake Winnebago; having a supply of sympathy cards

readily available for customers ordering cheese, veggie and taco trays for funerals.

She stocks varied "Cheesehead" memorabilia. She's in communication with the Fond du Lac Area Convention and Visitors Bureau and prepared when a bus tour stops in. And, she laughingly calls herself a "local travel agent" — giving visitors advice on where to eat and what to do, and how to get there.

And repeat customers show Blank how people have come to rely on her business, both local residents and those visiting the area who regularly include a stop at Casa Anna in their vacation plans.

"People depend on me. ... they want their cheese," she said.

"The community is a big part of my business being as good as it is," she said, noting how in addition to local customer support, members of the business community back each other with referrals. "Every year we grow and add new products. ... I've never regretted it."

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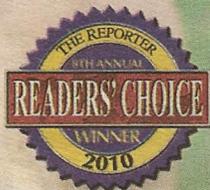
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