

Butter's comeback boosts creamery



Brenna Wiegand/For the Capital Press

General manager Tom Hughes talks with butter maker Tyler Taplin at the churn on Larsen's Creamery's 7,000-square-foot production floor. The business churns out more than 25 million pounds of butter a year.

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**
For the Capital Press

Larsen's Creamery does one thing, and does it well.

"All we make is butter," General manager Tom Hughes said. "There are not a lot of creameries around and that basically identifies us as a survivor. To my knowledge there's just one other size butter operation that functions as we do that only produces butter, and that's back on the East Coast."

This has Hughes concerned.

"With the closures, acquisitions and mergers of so many other creameries it's kind of left us out here," Hughes said. "If we're going to have a lot of milk out here, where's that milk going to go?"

In the meantime, butter is

making something a comeback among health-conscious consumers.

Once reviled as public-health enemy No. 1, butter is now being pitched as a more wholesome alternative to margarine and trans fats. Americans are forecast to eat 8 percent more butter this year compared to last year, the most since 1967, USDA data show.

That's been helped by large enterprises switching to butter. That includes McDonald's in its signature Egg McMuffin, calling for an estimated 600 million pounds of milk per year. Jack in the Box and Burger King have also made the change.

Founded in 1927, Larsen's Creamery is in Clackamas, Ore., and owned by Andrew Gianopoulos. The plant produces more than 25 million pounds of butter a year and has a 9½-acre footprint that includes a 7,000-square-foot production space and 32,000 square feet of cooler and freezer space.

"The demand for butter keeps increasing. You're seeing the institutional users jump into it. People are coming back to natural fats and they're recognizing that butter is not the Darth Vader of the food indus-



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Tyler Taplin keeps the butter churning at Larsen's Creamery in Clackamas, Ore. Larsen's is one of the few creameries left and produces butter from start to finish and from small foil-wrapped pats to 55-pound blocks of solid butter for industrial use.

try," Hughes said. "Natural, delicious fat is coming back and we're riding the wave of that."

Despite the renewed demand for butter, margins are small and Larsen's must stay on its toes to remain profitable.

Among the challenges is finding skilled employees.

"It's tough to find qualified people and difficult to pay the wages that are being demanded," Hughes said. "It's not an easy job and you'll find these young millennials come out and want to start at the top and get paid even more than being started at the top."

He said it takes two to five years to train a good-quality butter maker "and it's hard to find people that will be dedicated and develop a passion for this business when they can go on down the street to Portland for a more laid back environment."

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