

[CHICAGO'S TOP WORKPLACES](#)

Top Workplaces 2023: Nuestro Queso, Hispanic cheesemaker, cultivates a strong culture through investments in the environment, employees

By [Francine Knowles](#)

Chicago Tribune

•

Published: Nov 08, 2023 at 5:00 am

[Expand](#)



Mark Braun, CEO of Nuestro Queso, stands in a soybean field that uses treated wastewater from the company's factory for irrigation, Sept. 13, 2023, in Kent, Illinois. This is just one of Nuestro Queso long-term sustainability efforts. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune)

Ask Mark Braun, the CEO of Hispanic Cheese Makers-Nuestro Queso LLC, what the key to cultivating a strong workplace culture is and you'll get a deceptively simple answer: core values.

Braun's company has made a number of environmental investments, including the creation of a \$4.5 million reserve that reuses manufacturing wastewater to irrigate agricultural crops. The company also invests in its employees, providing training so that they can advance in their careers and, over the summer, began work on a new break room for the staff.

"They all tie together, it's the values and standards and how you conduct yourself," Braun said. "We're just going to do the right thing. Oftentimes, it's not the least expensive, but it's the right thing. People recognize that."



Ingrid Villatoro pulls long strands of Oaxaca cheese at Nuestro Queso on Sept. 13, 2023, in Kent. Nuestro Queso employs 182 people and is the second-largest employer in Stephenson County, according to CEO Mark Braun. It makes more than 20 million pounds of cheese annually. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune)



Workers stack packaged cotija cheese into a mound at Nuestro Queso. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune)

The company, which produces Mexican, Caribbean and Central American-style cheese and creams at its manufacturing site in Kent, Illinois, is ranked No. 94 among small employers on the Tribune's list of Top Workplaces, as measured by the consultancy Energage in Exton, Pennsylvania.

Chicago-based Nuestro Queso LLC, which employs 183 people, is a private-brand, co-packaging and ingredients manufacturer. Its customers include national retailers, top brands, distributors and manufacturers.

All the company's cheeses are free of growth hormones and use milk sourced from farmers who are committed to animal welfare, Braun said.

“It makes you feel proud to work here,” head cheesemaker Jesus Vazquez said of the company’s commitment to sustainability, the environment and animal welfare, speaking through a translator.

In addition to creating the reserve, Nuestro Queso also replaced a water softening system that used chlorides with a system that makes purified water and that uses less chemicals. Braun also said all of the factory’s lighting has been converted to LED, and new energy-efficient HVAC systems have been installed.



Large lagoons of manufacturing wastewater from Nuestro Queso’s plant is used to irrigate near the company’s factory. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune)

Francisco Nicolat, who works in accounts payable and receivables, said he feels “definite satisfaction” in working for a company that cares about the community and the environment.

Employees said opportunities for advancement also help make Nuestro Queso a top workplace. Nicolat has worked there for 14 years. He started off working part-time in the warehouse helping fill customer orders before moving into an office administration job and advancing to his present position.

Vazquez has worked at the plant for 12 years. He started out as an operator, before moving up to team leader, pasteurizer and now to head cheesemaker.

“The company does a good job in giving people the opportunity to grow,” Vazquez said of his personal experience. “I didn’t want to be stuck in one position.”

Staff have the freedom to propose things, such as ways to improve efficiency, he added.

Rosa Dominguez, quality assurance assistant manager at the plant, also has been able to advance. She previously worked as a lab technician at the plant and as quality supervisor before rising to her current position.



Rosa Dominguez, center, an assistant quality control manager at Nuestro Queso, chats with line workers. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune)

The relationship between management and the nonmanagement staff is positive, she said, noting that “employees are able to speak to management easily. I feel they have a good connection with our team. There’s always ups and downs, but all in all, there’s good communication.”

Nuestro Queso has worked hard to create a positive culture and take care of its employees, Human Resources Manager Jane West said.

“It’s like a family company,” she said. “Probably everybody on our production floor knows who Mark is. They know who our CFO is. They know everybody in our corporate office because they come here. It shows employees it doesn’t matter your title, they care.”

West said the company offers training so that employees can move up, achieve goals, and “find meaning in their job and feel like they are not just a number on the floor. We care about making sure they can operate successfully.”

Last year the company implemented a new monthly training program called Alchemy that covered food safety, quality, inclusion, bullying, mental wellness and a wide range of other topics, she said.

The company also broke ground this summer on an expansion that, besides the new breakroom, includes new bathroom facilities and lockers for employees.

Nuestro Queso offers a comprehensive benefits package that it touts as one of the best in the industry and that includes medical, dental and vision, a 401(k) plan and attendance bonuses. Benefits also include short-term and long-term disability coverage that is paid for entirely by the company for employees who sign up for medical insurance.

The cheesemaker has benefited from its positive workplace culture as evidenced through low employee turnover and its ability to attract workers, Braun said.

“We have stacks of applications for employees,” Braun said. “We’re talking about in an environment where it’s tough to find labor. Employees talk to employees from other places and say, ‘You should come work here.’ That feeds on itself.”



Workers roll Oaxaca cheese into balls at Nuestro Queso. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune)

He credits the company's culture with contributing greatly to its growth and success.

"The company has tripled the business in the last four years," he said. "That's huge for a food company. That's in terms of revenues, production, by any metric that we use. Our business grew over 40% last year, and it's up over that again this year. We've tripled the size of our workforce in just the last two years."

So what's key to maintaining a top workplace amid continuing rapid growth?

"It's just sticking to our core values. If we do that, we will remain there. We don't want to drift away from that, and we really haven't," Braun said.

Francine Knowles is a freelance writer.