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Staff, recent grad join trip to Thailand to explore Wisconsin dairy export opportunities

Written by UW-River Falls

Wisconsin dairy products are known worldwide, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t still opportunities to spread the word a little further. University of Wisconsin-River Falls faculty and staff, along with a recent UWRF graduate traveled to Thailand as part of a larger group this summer to learn about the country’s growing dairy industry and explore opportunities to collaborate.

The trip was funded by a grant from the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP).

"The idea behind the grant was to promote collaboration and networking between the dairy industries in Wisconsin and Thailand,” said Grace Lewis, a UWRF assistant professor of food science and principal investigator for the grant. “Part of the project was trying to design a dairy product suitable for export from Wisconsin to Thailand.”

Lewis was joined on the nine-day trip by UWRF Dairy Plant Manager Rueben Nilsson; recent UWRF graduate Nevaeh Bolinger; Director of Quality and Grading for Wisconsin Aging & Grading Cheese, Inc. Randy Swensen; and UWRF Assistant Professor of Geology Kevin Thaisen. They were accompanied by Apilak and Sukanya Sirikeratikul, Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin representatives in Thailand, who organized their travel.

The group spent time in Bangkok and Chiang Mai meeting with dairy farmers, cheesemakers, restaurant groups, retailers, research and development-based companies, exporters, importers and universities. Their goal was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Thai dairy industry from farm to table and to explore opportunities for Wisconsin cheese in the market. They also spent time learning about the culture of Thailand.

While Thailand’s dairy industry is not as large or as developed as Wisconsin’s, it is growing, and Lewis said the group sampled excellent artisan cheeses during their trip. Lewis, Nilsson and Swensen all serve as professional cheese judges and they encouraged a cheesemaker from Dacheeso, Chiang Mai’s original artisan cheese company founded in 1988, to enter her smoked cheddar and mozzarella in world competitions.

“We left that meeting very inspired because that cheesemaker was very passionate about her occupation and she was very sweet and humble” Lewis said. “When we told her she should submit these cheeses, she was dumbfounded.”

Lewis and the group also tried new flavors created with various spices and production techniques. She explained that there was a lot to learn about the art and science of creating the complex flavors they encountered, which was highlighted during a meeting led by Anuwat Churyen, director of the International Gastronomy Tourism Centre at Maejo University.

“They use a lot of herbs and spices, different curries and chilies,” Lewis said. “And it’s not just about the ingredients. You need to handle them in certain ways to maintain the aromatic and flavor profile. For example, you don’t want to heat things at too high of a temperature or blend ingredients too vigorously because you’ll release some of the desired volatiles, affecting the flavor and aroma.”

The group also visited the U.S. Consulate in Chiang Mai and the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok to express their appreciation to the Consulate and the U.S. Department of Agriculture for the support of Wisconsin cheese in Thailand.

Bolinger, of Oakdale, Minn., graduated in 2025 with a degree in food science and technology and had the opportunity to go on the trip after assisting on a project to incorporate Thai flavors and seasonings into cheese, a product development opportunity for national and international consumers. Taylor Nielson, a food science and technology major and rising senior from Peshtigo, also assisted on the project through the [**Wuethrich Family/Grassland Dairy Center of Excellence**](https://students.uwrf.edu/anfs/learn-doing).

“My experience traveling to Thailand is one that I will remember forever,” Bolinger said. “Experiencing another culture through visiting their places of worship, eating their foods and learning about their spiritual beliefs only covers a little of what our trip entailed.”

Other highlights included visiting Michelin Star restaurants and having a virtual meeting with Ian Kittichai, an Iron Chef from Bangkok.

Bolinger said the experience opened her eyes to many potential career paths.

“This experience has made me realize that there are countless job opportunities, especially in food science-related fields, which I find very promising for this growing degree,” she said. “The opportunities are truly endless, and traveling or moving to another country for work is always an option.”

Going forward, Bolinger said she would like to travel to a different country every year and continue to learn about other cultures.

DATCP leaders praised the effort in Thailand as a model of strategic collaboration and global outreach in expanding Wisconsin’s dairy exports.

“The work done by the University of Wisconsin-River Falls team in Thailand is a great example of collaboration driving Wisconsin dairy exports,” said Jennifer Lu, international economic development consultant at DATCP. Lu has been closely involved in the Thailand project over the past three years for the department.

“This project reflects the mission of the Wisconsin Initiative for Agricultural Exports to grow Wisconsin’s reach in key markets,” said Julie Lassa, Division of Agricultural Development administrator at DATCP.  “Through this partnership, the university, Dairy Farmers of Wisconsin and DATCP are sharing Wisconsin’s world-class dairy across the globe.”

Lewis says she will now work to keep the momentum going after the trip, collaborating with Chiang Mai University in Northern Thailand on dairy products and exploring opportunities for student and faculty exchanges between the two universities.

“I’m really motivated to keep moving forward in this project,” Lewis said. “Everybody was so inspiring over there.”