



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact:

Jennifer Giambroni, VP of Communications
California Milk Advisory Board
jgiambroni@cmab.net / (209) 690-8244

Smearcase's Innovative Frozen Cottage Cheese Disrupts the Indulgence Aisle, Wins \$100,000 Grand Prize at the 2025 Real California Milk Excelerator Final Pitch Event

Tracy, Calif. – December 15, 2025 – The California Milk Advisory Board (CMAB) recently announced Smearcase as the grand prize winner at the 7th Real California Milk (RCM) Excelerator product innovation competition. The award was presented during the 2025 RCM Excelerator live pitch event on December 11th in Napa, Calif., where four new finalists were also selected to compete for the 2026 grand prize.

This competitive program is designed to drive value-added dairy innovation using California milk, ultimately strengthening the state's dairy industry by providing brands with access to sustainably produced milk as well as resources, expertise, and non-dilutive funding to grow their businesses. As the winner of the 2025 Real California Milk Excelerator, Smearcase will receive \$100,000 worth of marketing support from the CMAB to continue scaling their dairy-based innovation with milk from California dairy farm families.

Through the Excelerator, early-stage companies are able to leverage the power of Real California Dairy by accessing:

- Tailored content and resources specific to the dairy industry, including access to quality, sustainably sourced milk, and other dairy ingredients
- Mentorship from leading experts across product development, marketing, distribution, and sales
- Extensive exposure to industry stakeholders

Smearcase was one of four finalists named in 2024 when the company was selected for its innovation as the first cottage cheese-based ice cream infused with collagen. As a "better-for-you" ice cream option, Smearcase features the most protein per pint of ice cream at about 40 grams and does not use artificial gums or sweeteners. Targeting health-conscious consumers, co-founders Joe Rotondo and Drew

DiSpirito, launched the New York City-based brand after training for a marathon and identifying a market gap for high-protein ice cream.

Since being selected for the 2024 cohort, the founders have scaled production using Real California Milk and continue to demonstrate their company's tremendous potential. Smearcase won this year's Grand Prize based on their sales growth throughout the year. The company was recognized as a Dairy Foods 2025 Dairy Product of the Year Finalist and over the past year launched their products regionally in Whole Foods and will debut in Sprouts markets in Q1 2026. The \$100,000 grand prize will provide marketing support for initiatives like on-pack promotions, digital and instant redeemable coupons, product sampling, and in-store signage to further drive brand awareness and retail expansion.

"The California Milk Advisory Board has taken our business to a whole new level," Smearcase co-founder Joe Rotondo said. "They've opened doors that allowed us to work with world-class partners. We've increased the quality of our product and increased the scalability of our business with their collaboration."

The Real California Milk Excelsator was established by the CMAB seven years ago to drive transformational growth for innovative dairy products that can deliver value both to consumers and the dairy community. Programs like the Excelsator play a crucial role in bridging the gap for high-potential food and beverage startups.

"Innovation pushes our industry forward, and Smearcase is a clear example of what happens when bold thinking meets real dairy. Their frozen cottage cheese is opening an entirely new lane in frozen indulgence. We're proud to support their growth through the Real California Milk Excelsator and give consumers another fresh way to enjoy the benefits real California milk and dairy can offer," said Bob Carroll, CEO of the CMAB.

At the 2025 Real California Milk Excelsator Live Pitch Event, attendees also experienced product tastings and exhibitions from seven pioneering dairy startups, and witnessed the selection of four new finalists chosen by a panel of judges from this year's cohort:

- [Joseph Farms](#)' String Cheese (Atwater, Calif.) - 99% lactose-free string cheese with 7g protein per stick.
- [Mavens Creamery](#) (San Jose, Calif.) - Asian-inspired indulgent ice cream made with rich, exotic ingredients in flavors like Thai Tea, Durian, and Black Sesame.
- [Pioneer Pastures](#) (Bozeman, MT) - Ultra Filtered, A2 whole milks crafted for superior nutrition and taste with higher protein and lower sugar for easier digestion.
- [Sweet Craft](#) Dessert Cups (Oceanside, Calif.) - Clean-label, Italian-inspired dessert cups in BPA-free packaging.

"This year's grand prize winner and finalists reflect the energy and creativity of California dairy," said Fred Schonenberg, CEO of VentureFuel. "Their ideas are reshaping the category, and we're proud to stand behind them with the CMAB as they help spark continued innovation and growth for dairy."

The final pitch event offered industry stakeholders an opportunity to engage with products poised to shape the future of dairy, while also showcasing the commitment of California's dairy farmers to sustainable practices. California is the leading U.S. state in dairy production. Its family dairy farms are focused on delivering the wholesome goodness of California milk while creating a more sustainable future for dairy in the state.

California is the leading U.S. state in dairy production. Its family dairy farms are focused on delivering the wholesome goodness of California milk while creating a more sustainable future for dairy in the state.

###

About Real California Milk/California Milk Advisory Board

The California Milk Advisory Board (CMAB), an instrumentality of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, is funded by the state's dairy farm families who lead the nation in sustainable dairy farming practices. With a vision to nourish the world with the wholesome goodness of Real California Milk, the CMAB's programs focus on increasing demand for California's sustainable dairy products in the state, across the U.S. and around the world through advertising, public relations, research, and retail and foodservice promotional programs. For more information and to connect with the CMAB, visit RealCaliforniaMilk.com, [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), [TikTok](#), [X](#), [Instagram](#) and [Pinterest](#).

About VentureFuel

VentureFuel helps accelerate enterprise growth through startup partnerships. Its custom accelerators drive transformative change with less risk, more speed, and greater proximity to the consumer than traditional innovation models. VentureFuel provides organizations like Hershey's, Comcast, Dick's Sporting Goods, AARP Foundation and the State of California with the tools to learn, test, build and invest in what's next.

Learn more at: www.venturefuel.net, [LinkedIn](#), [X](#), and [Instagram](#). You can listen to The VentureFuel Visionaries podcast on [Apple](#), [Spotify](#), [Simplecast](#) or wherever you get your podcasts.