

The Cargill Master Series

Who are the people behind Cargill's innovative ingredients, beverages and food? Here's an inside look at the experts who work every day researching ingredients and developing recipes, beverages and foods that feed the world.



Q&A with Vince Cavallini

Beverage, Snacks, and Cereals Applications Manager



Vince Cavallini grew up in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, playing trumpet in his high school marching band, swimming competitively and becoming an Eagle Scout. He went on to study at the University of Illinois, earning a degree in food science and human nutrition. His first post-graduate job was developing soy protein beverages and meat analogues. Cavallini landed at Cargill in 2003, where his team develops prototypes across Cargill's beverage, snacks and cereals portfolio. He is married and has a son, who is four. We caught up with Cavallini to find out more.

How did you become interested in food and beverages?

My parents were good cooks and would cook a lot of interesting things. But what really started me down that path was my dad's job as a health inspector. From him, I got an inside view of what goes on in restaurants, kitchens, grocery stores. How food is prepared, how it is processed, how it's made safe for people to eat. I didn't want to become a health inspector, so I took it in a different direction. I got into food science. I had a knack for science, so blending food with chemistry really appealed to me.

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Who helped you see what was possible in your life?

My parents encouraged me to try a lot of different things and pursue what was important to me. But outside my family, probably my high school chemistry teacher, Mr. Turner. He was also one of our swim coaches, so I got to know him through coaching and chemistry class. He had an impact in my high school career for both athletics and academics. Becoming an Eagle Scout was a lot of work and something I'm proud of. Through that, and through some of the things I did in high school, I learned about honesty, integrity, working hard, being dedicated. If you put in the hard work, give it 100 percent, try to the best of your ability, even if you don't accomplish your goals, you'll feel proud.

What's a typical work day like for you?

My day is always customer focused, whether executing a project, talking with my team, or in the lab putting together products and prototypes. I'm always making sure we are meeting our standards, requirements and customer requests for either great-tasting beverages or snacks.

What about when you are not at work?

In the summer, I try to get to the pool with my son, be outside with him, maybe get to a lake house with the family, and get in some training with my wife. We both do mud and obstacle races like the Tough Mudder. We do a decent amount of weight training, try to do some cardio training to prepare for that. I don't need to be the fastest person, I don't go crazy. They're tough to get through. I just do them to accomplish them.

What's the best part of your job?

When we get the customers into our lab. We have some great capabilities at Cargill — test kitchens, the food plants. I encourage customers to come and work with us side-by-side on the bench to create a new product or to improve on a current product. Those are the exciting times for us — when we can bring that customer in to work with us together on a product. We tend to have more successes that way. It's really cool to see a beverage or food product on the store shelves that you helped design and create.

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Vince with his team.

What's the toughest part of your job?

The hardest part is meeting our customer's needs. They have very high standards, and we do as well. Sometimes it's hard to meet their needs and develop the products they are expecting. The hardest part of all of that, is when we make a great product, but it wasn't what we were expecting, or what we wanted. When that happens, you try to be honest, talk through with them the things you could have changed, what you would want to do different for that type of product, be honest about what you are seeing with that particular beverage or snack. Taking that criticism is hard to do, but the client relationship won't last if you get offended.

What's your favorite beverage?

I'm a big tea drinker. I drink different types of teas, both hot and cold. Green tea, black tea, red tea, flavored teas, all the different types of teas. I remember making tea in the summer as a child, putting it out in the sun to brew.

Has any trouble ever come from having to sample the product?

We had an intern one summer when we happened to be tasting some tequila products. It was 10 o'clock in the morning, but we had to move this product forward, to make sure it was what the client wanted and see how it was tasting. We pour our samples into little 1- or 2-oz cups and they kind of look like shot glasses. Everyone took their cup, they took a sip, they gave their feedback. You don't really drink the whole thing. Our intern grabbed it and downed it like a shot. We all had a good laugh on that.

Were there any big breaks that helped you in your career?

I'm of the older school of thought. I've worked my way through various jobs in the food applications team by being consistent and a good performer. There's not some big break that got me through. You put in your time, work hard, accomplish what you need to, you'll be rewarded for that over time. People recognize that. Your effort will pay off.

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