

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 Jaime Underwood

Senior Technical Services Manager – AMCAS, at Cargill



Jaime Underwood, Senior Technical Services Manager–AMCAS for Cargill, grew up exploring the edge of the Everglades on her family home outside of Naples, in Southern Florida. She entered college on a music scholarship, but realized her passion for music wouldn't translate to a solid career. Instead, she turned to biology and, ultimately, food science. Underwood holds a Bachelor of Arts in Musical Performance, a Bachelor of Science in Biology and Biotechnology from Florida Gulf Coast University, as well as a Master of Science in Food Science and Technology from Kansas State University. She joined the team at Cargill in the fall of 2016 after working at Kerry and CPKelco. Underwood and her husband live in Chicago. We recently caught up with her to learn more about her life and work.

What was it like, growing up in Southern Florida?

Our home was situated on taken-back swampland, on lots of acreage bordering the Everglades. It wasn't a farm, but we had vegetable gardens, chickens, goats, geese, dogs and cats. We had ATVs and go-carts and friends down the street who had a mini ranch with horses we rode.

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My parents divorced when I was young, and my mom remarried, so we had a blended family. I have a younger brother, and a stepbrother I grew up with as my own. My brothers and I spent a lot of time outside in the woods and swamps, fishing for grouper and other fish in the mangroves back before you needed a fishing license. It was a lot of fun.

What types of things were you interested in as a teen?

I made varsity softball during my freshman year of high school, and lettered in softball. I played second base. I'm 4 feet 9 inches, but used to have a pretty nice vertical jump. I also played piccolo in the marching band, ran track, plus traveled all over the country competing in speech and debate. I was in theater and played flute and competitive piano. I won regional piano competitions several years in a row, and started college on a music scholarship for piano and flute.

What are your interests now, outside of work?

I'm still very active and athletic. Triathlons, marathons and ultra-marathons are probably my main outlet now. I completed the Chattanooga Half Ironman in May. My next goal is to tackle the Milwaukee marathon in October. I joined a triathlon training group when we moved to Chicago. That's how we met all of our friends. We travel to races together, sometimes renting a house and exploring the area.

Do you still play softball?

Now I golf competitively. I'm on a women's national match play team. We play matches with other teams around the country. The competitive golf season just started up. There is a big tournament coming up in September. I'll be training for that.

Has your training and competing influenced your approach to how you work?

I am a type-A personality and I'm also really hyper... so one personality flaw is that I tend to get aggressive with work. I like getting projects done – and I like getting them done right now – but not everyone works that way. In order to be laid-back and more patient at work and with my family, I need that crazy-competitive outlet. I get up at 5 a.m. every morning to train, and if I don't do that, I'm a mess. I can't handle a day if I don't have some way to release that energy. It helps me stay level.

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What does a senior technical services manager at Cargill do?

I am one of a handful of experts in the U.S. in the hydrocolloids product line, working with products like pectin, carrageenan and xanthan gum. Cargill brought me in almost two years ago to be the senior technical services manager for the hydrocolloids product line. My main function is to help our customers and internal folks better understand the product line – the ingredients themselves, as well as how to use them in various applications. I educate people, help develop products, get the products into the market, making sure there is a good user experience and the products are successful.

How did you become interested in food science?

I honestly didn't know food science existed until I graduated from college. I had a degree in music performance, but it was not a lucrative profession. I floundered for a couple of years, then took a personality test at a community college. After that, I went back to school to get a biology degree with a focus on biotechnology. I worked for a genetic research firm for a while. Then I came across a food company that needed an analytical chemist. I worked with them as a temp, helped them set up a lab, and after that they offered me a job. So, I kind of fell into it.

What was your path to Cargill?

I was in product development at Kerry in Wisconsin for a number of years, and worked with ingredients as a Beverage Development Manager. Then I started working at CPKelco in Chicago as a Technical Services Representative, and later as a Regional Sales Manager, because I wanted to spend more time problem-solving with customers. I was fairly happy at CPKelco, but they are a small company and there wasn't a lot of mobility. A colleague whom I had crossed paths with throughout my career, Michelle Kozora, had started at Cargill and looked me up, saying Cargill needed somebody with hydrocolloid expertise.

How did you become an expert in hydrocolloids?

It wasn't anything I pursued directly. When I started back in my first food job, I was working on all of these beverages and really got interested in different stabilizers. I worked on problems like fruit pulp – how to prevent all the pulp from falling to the bottom, or preventing what's called "cloud," where the beverage gets hazy. I started doing my own research into stabilizers. I ended up meeting a man who would hire me into CPKelco, a hydrocolloids company where I learned the extremely technical details and chemistry of getting the ingredients to work properly.

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Have most of your jobs happened through word-of-mouth?

The only job I've ever had to seek out was my first job in the food industry. The rest have come through growing organic relationships. The opportunities have just kind of happened. I'm a friendly person. If I really click with someone, I want to stay connected with them and keep them close. It's not intentional; it's just part of my personality. My very first boss and I still talk on a weekly basis. I still have the same group of friends I've had since high school.

What's an average day at work like for you?

It varies. I spend a lot of time on the phone with customers. I do a lot of larger internal projects, helping coordinate, doing research, looking at new products to put in our product line, determining what we should be looking at and identifying market gaps. A big part of my job is going into customer facilities to look at how they are producing something. We get a lot of calls from customers saying, "your pectin isn't working right," for example. It's not usually our pectin, but rather the fact that they are missing something in the process. So, I go into their lab or production facility, look at the entire process and see what they should tweak to get a better product. The hardest thing with specialty ingredients is that you have to dial it in exactly right, or it doesn't work.

What do you think are the qualities that have helped you be successful?

I think a part of it is that I have a precise experimental design process I go through when I'm doing experimental development. I spent a lot of time in my career working with dietary ingredients, and learned how necessary it is to find out a lot about the ingredients and their proper use levels before I even start a project. It's important to understand the background of all the ingredients you are using and the type of product you are going to make, so you aren't just throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping it will stick.

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Is there a particular life moment that helped you start the path to where you are today?

I'm in my second marriage. After my first marriage ended, I was at a turning point financially and emotionally, and was having a very hard time. I was living in Texas, far away from my family, and had a choice. Should I give everything up, move back with my mother for a while and reevaluate my life? Or should I take a huge jump off a cliff, move to Wisconsin, take a job, and start over by myself? I chose to leave the South (which I'd never done before) move to Wisconsin and see what I could do with my career. My personality changed – my outlook on life changed – when I made this decision. It was a moment in my life where I took my own destiny in my hands and moved forward.

What helped shape your values?

Growing up the way that I did. My parents worked. We were latchkey kids, responsible for getting ourselves to school on time, doing our homework, getting good grades and not getting into trouble. The life we had forged a lot of independence. We were taught to take risks. You may learn something, you may fall back, but if you don't try something new, you will never know.

What is meaningful in your life now?

My relationships with the people I care about – my family, my friends. My husband, Jeff, is my best friend and my biggest supporter. He goes to the golf matches with me and does all the races with me, which really keeps me going, having someone there for me. My younger brother is here now, staying with me while he works in Chicago. I stay connected with my family and friends, and we have a positive influence on each other, picking each other up when we fall.

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