



Real California Milk Excelerator Launches 2026 Cohort with Products Tackling Consumer Demand for Global Flavors, Functional Nutrition, Convenience and Experiential Indulgence

15 companies join 8th annual innovation program with growth-stage and early-stage tracks designed to accelerate revenue growth, retail expansion, investment readiness and AI-enabled business transformation

TRACY, Calif., Oct. 1, 2026 /PRNewswire/ -- The **California Milk Advisory Board (CMAB)**, in partnership with **VentureFuel**, today announced the 15 companies selected to participate in the 8th Annual Real California Milk (RCM) Excelerator. Since 2021, alumni of the award-winning program have generated nearly \$60 million in brand sales for the dairy category, and past winners, including Petit Pot and Smearcase, have gone on to transform their segments within the dairy category.

The program has evolved into two tracks to support brands at various stages of growth, with separate cohorts for growth-stage companies and earlier-stage products. The Growth-Stage Excelerator includes eight companies, while seven companies will participate in the earlier-stage Incubator track. Both tracks provide access to programming, mentorship and resources designed to accelerate company and product growth.

This year's Excelerator cohort showcases how brands are leaning into global flavors, functional nutrition, convenience and experiential indulgence to meet today's consumer demands. The 2026 cohort reflects the growth and versatility of real dairy in fueling the next generation of food innovation. Innova Market Insights' *Top Global Dairy and Dairy Alternatives Trends 2026* identifies functionality, gut health, protein, convenience and occasion-driven formats as key forces shaping dairy innovation, and the cohorts reflect these broader shifts underway across dairy.

The 2026 Growth-Stage Excelerator cohort includes:

Leo Leo Gelato (Paso Robles, Calif.) – Sea salt caramel gelato cookie sandwiches crafted in small batches using fresh local dairy and thoughtfully sourced ingredients from California's Central Coast. Represented by Founder and President Niccolo Lekai.

Life Raft Treats (North Charleston, S.C.) – Ice cream bars that look like fried chicken drumsticks, *Not Fried Chicken Ice Cream* is a category-defining, one-of-a-kind frozen treat disrupting the novelty ice cream aisle. Represented by Founder and CEO Cynthia Wong.

Maazah (Minneapolis, Minn.) – Bold, ultra-creamy Afghan yogurt dips with clean ingredients, vibrant herbs and a focus on versatility that reimagine familiar favorites with a distinct Middle Eastern flair. Represented by Founder and CEO Yasameen Sajady.

RoseBud Ice Cream (Glen Ellyn, Ill.) – Soft serve ice cream in a mess-free pouch, helping consumers enjoy parlor-quality soft serve anywhere without the spills. Represented by Founder and Cream Executive Officer Sam Rose.

Secret Creamery (Las Vegas, Nev.) – Super-premium ice cream with a proprietary four-strain probiotic mix built around an AAPI-influenced flavor portfolio that brings East and Southeast Asian flavors into the American freezer aisle. Represented by Owner Brian Mosko.

Hartman Strawberry/Acai Protein Drink (Ontario, Calif.) – High-protein drinkable yogurt in a freeze/thaw format with an extended shelf life that delivers protein and gut-health benefits in a convenient format. Represented by Partner Bob Cannone.

Tulsi Foods (Anaheim, Calif.) – High-quality, clean-label paneer crafted using traditional methods with no additives, delivering authentic homemade taste and superior cooking performance that takes paneer from the ethnic aisle into the mainstream dairy case. Represented by CFO Tanuj Chawla.

Yah Yah Yah (Denver, Colo.) – Premium ready-to-drink iced lattes inspired by authentic Middle Eastern coffee traditions and made with clean-label ingredients including real milk, real honey, 5 grams of prebiotic fiber and no artificial sweeteners or preservatives. Represented by Founder and CEO Sarah Yahya.

The seven companies selected for the earlier-stage **Incubator track** have products that highlight the next wave of dairy innovation: **Yaza Foods, Freezecake Snacks, Teiny, Mac Squares, Kadak, Spun and Monava**. Their concepts span a diverse range of dairy innovations, from labneh and freeze-dried cheesecake to cottage cheese-based snacks, frozen mac and cheese, ready-to-drink protein chai, cultured dairy-based ice cream and a ready-to-drink latte designed specifically for healthcare workers.

"The Real California Milk Excelsator is built to evolve with the needs of founders and the realities of today's CPG market," said Bob Carroll, CEO of the CMAB. "After eight years, we're doubling down on commercialization, helping companies using the Real California Milk seal to scale their businesses, strengthen their path to market and navigate an increasingly challenging CPG environment. That's the California spirit at the heart of this program: bringing innovation to dairy and giving entrepreneurs the tools, connections and support they need to turn great ideas into lasting businesses."

The program will culminate in December at an exclusive pitch event in **San Luis Obispo, Calif.**, where all eight Excelerator companies will present their businesses and products to a live judging panel. During the pitch event, four finalists will be selected to receive \$30,000 each in marketing support. Those four companies will then be tracked over the next 12 months for in-market performance, competing for a \$100,000 grand prize to be awarded in 2027. The event will also reveal the \$100,000 grand prize winner from the 2025 Real California Milk Excelerator finalist group.

"For eight years, the Excelerator has helped entrepreneurs turn innovative dairy products into businesses with real momentum," said Fred Schonenberg, Founder and CEO of VentureFuel. "In 2026, we're doubling down on what founders need most to scale and providing a 'Commercialization Engine for Value-Added Dairy Innovation,' giving founders practical support and measurable pathways to growth, getting products on shelves, driving sales and creating lasting demand for California dairy."

To learn more about this year's Excelerator and Incubator cohorts and their products, visit **RealCAMilkExcelerator.com**.

About Real California Milk/California Milk Advisory Board

The California Milk Advisory Board (CMAB), an instrumentality of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, represents California's dairy farm families and promotes products made with Real California Milk. California is the nation's leading milk-producing state and a global leader in sustainable dairy farming, dairy innovation and value-added dairy product development.

Through consumer marketing, foodservice initiatives, retail partnerships, export programs and startup innovation platforms such as the Real California Milk Excelerator, CMAB works to increase demand for California dairy products across the United States and around the world. The organization supports innovation across categories including cheese, butter, cultured dairy products, dairy beverages, functional foods, nutrition products and other value-added dairy applications.

The Real California Milk seal identifies products made with milk from California dairy farm families, known for their commitment to sustainability, animal care and producing high-quality dairy ingredients and products. Learn more at **RealCaliforniaMilk.com**, **[Facebook](#)**, **[YouTube](#)**, **[Tik Tok](#)**, **[Instagram](#)** and **[Pinterest](#)**.

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