



THE BIG CHEESE

Quebec cheesemaker bags the winning packaging formula to fuel growth

When it comes to cheesemaking, patience is a real virtue that rewards those with a keen nose for determining when the product has aged just right. It is a virtue that has helped Luc Livernoche, president and founder of the Le Gardeur, Que.-based **La Fromagerie Champêtre (The Champêtre Cheese Dairy)**, to remain on course of realizing his goal of building up a thriving and reputable cheesemaking enterprise.

In many ways, the company he founded back in 1996 is already at least half-way there, boasting some award-winning cheddar cheeses and curds in its product portfolio, and seemingly bottomless market demand that periodically prompts extensive capital investment into advanced processing and packaging machinery.

Since moving into the current, 12,000-square-foot facility in 2003, Champêtre has grown by leaps and bounds, according to Livernoche, in large part thanks to the quality and popularity of its cheddar-cheese products.

"It all begins with the milk we get from our cows," says Livernoche, adding that cheddar cheese and its byproducts account for almost 90 per cent of the company's entire production output.

One of the more prominent and marketable byproducts in cheddar-cheese production are the cheese curds, which are produced thanks to an enzyme called rennin, used to curdle milk by reducing its water content, separating the whey via draining, and condensing and squeezing the remains to form a denser, harder curd.

After molding it to the desired shape and salting it, various microflora is added to ripen the cheese and help it determine the final texture and aroma. For Champêtre's hard-ripened cheddar, the curds are further compressed and more bacteria is added.

At this point, whatever curds are to be used for making actual bricks or wheels of cheeses is wrapped into wax or plastic, to prevent any risk of contamination, and set aside for the proper time period.

There is no doubt that Livernoche has this procedure and ritual down to an exact science, as evidenced by the top prize awarded to his product last year at the *Quebec Selection Caseus* fine cheese competition in Warwick, Que..

Alongside the 3,000 kilograms of cheddar cheese



Luc Livernoche, president of La Fromagerie Champêtre, holds up a bag of freshly-packaged cheddar-cheese curds in front of the WeighPack CombiScale weighing and filling machine.

expanded memory capacity for storing pre-programmed recipes.

Moreover, the *CombiScale* can be quickly disassembled without any tools for washing, decontamination or servicing, according to WeighPack, and it can interface with just about any other type of packaging machinery out there—always delivering top-notch accuracy right down to the gram.

Once the programmed target weight is achieved, the machine's buckets open up to release the cheese curds down a chute into the *Vertek 1150* vertical form/fill/seal (F/F/S) automatic bagging system with an incline infeed conveyor—also supplied by WeighPack.

The robust, mid-range *Vertek* model—rated to fill and seal up to 45 laminate or PET (polyethylene terephthalate) bags per minute—handles bag widths of three- to 11.5-inches, up to 18-inches-long, in a single stroke.

Champêtre manufactures daily, over the past year it steadily increased the production of various fine cheeses up to 400 kilograms per day.

These products include such brands as *la Raclette Champêtre*, *le Suisse Champêtre*, *le Brick* and *le Grand Chouffe*—which is a semi-soft refined cheese made with Belgian beer, which incidentally picked up a second-place award for aromatics at the aforementioned Warwick festival.

"We don't just enter contests, though," reflects Livernoche. "Everyday, through our own distribution network, we deliver fresh cheese to large food chains, delis, and a number of fine restaurants in the Montreal area.

"We're lucky that our curds are so popular and that the growing demand for them has meant we have had to continually increase our production every year," notes Livernoche.

To accommodate the growing production volumes, last November the dairy acquired a 10-head *CombiScale* system—a top-of-the-line filling machine built by the Montreal-based packaging equipment manufacturer **WeighPack Systems Inc.**

The *CombiScale* machine—also offered in eight-, 12-, 14- and 16-head configurations—provides a nice fit for Champêtre's high-speed production requirements, with a robust throughput rate that enables it to weigh and fill over 100 cycles per minute.

Equipped with easy-to-operate controls and a touchscreen operator interface, the machine—constructed largely of stainless steel—boasts an advanced digital control logic system and microprocessor-driven operation, as well as



A worker pours cheese curds onto an incline infeed conveyor that transports them up to the WeighPack CombiScale.

Much like the *CombiScale*, the *Vertek* machine is designed for low-maintenance operation, requiring no tools to remove the machine's contact parts for clean-up.

"The simplicity of the *CombiScale* and *Vertek* bagger was another great purchasing point, as both are very user-friendly and easy to learn," says WeighPack sales manager Nick Taraborelli.

"Our company is amongst the few that can offer a single-source solution for its customers," Taraborelli states. "We provide both linear and combination scales, vertical and horizontal baggers, incline and bucket conveyors. We really offer it all—from table-top scales to high-speed packaging lines, with everything in between."

Livernoche says he's delighted with the dramatic improvements in production that the installation of the two WeighPack machines has yielded at the plant.

"Before we installed these units, we used five employees to manually bag all of our cheese curds, doing about 500 packages per hour," he recalls.

"Since installing this completely new and automated equipment, our capacity has increased to over 2,500 packages per hour.

"And as the demand and order for our packets of cheese curds in the 60- to 170-gram sizes grew and grew, we needed to find a way to quickly increase our production while, of course, looking for ways to lower our unit cost.

"We did both when we purchased these WeighPack machines," states Livernoche.



La Fromagerie Champêtre employees prepare cheddar-cheese curds for packaging.



The 10-head WeighPack CombiScale at Champetre can fill over 100 packages of cheese curds per minute, and it is accurate to the gram.

Livernoche, while providing top-level performance in printing high-resolution, 300-dpi (dots per inch) bar-codes and variable data on top of flexible packaging and labels.

Livernoche adds he really appreciates the fact that Videojet's highly capable technical support staff is always within easy reach should the need arise, thanks

sumption of fresh milk by about one million liters per year—just about the pace he wants to maintain into the future.

"When we started up our current factory in 2003, we used 6.5 million liters of milk per year. This year, we'll be using over 10 million liters," states Livernoche, noting the plant has built-in extra capacity to handle up to 15 million liters of milk a year.

"When we originally planned out our factory, we envisioned our growth over a seven-year span," he says. "This is the space we planned for, meaning no problems in adding more equipment later."

Livernoche says he had carefully evaluated a number of other reputable equipment suppliers and manufacturers before finally setting on the WeighPack systems.

"First of all, WeighPack is a Canadian manufacturer," Livernoche points out. "Then there's the fact its customer service operation is at the high level that we expect and demand from our suppliers.

"Lastly, there was the extremely competitive price: up to 50 per cent less than other equipment with similar functions."

Says Livernoche: "Buying the equipment had a two-fold positive effect. It not only increased our production, but our sales as well—enabling us to increase our market share appreciably."

Another piece of equipment that helps Champetre keep the production moving and growing is the newly-installed DataFlex Plus V2.00 thermal-transfer printer from Videojet Technologies Canada L.P., used to mark up important lot numbers, best-before dates, and other relevant product information on every finished package leaving the dairy.

Engineered to ensure low-cost operation and ownership, the system provides a large memory capacity to permit the storage of important product data for all of the company's customers, according to

to the three Videojet branch offices operating in the Montreal area.

Since getting involved in the cheese business, Livernoche has seen Champetre increase its con-

For more information on: WeighPack Systems Inc. 412 Videojet Technologies Canada L.P. 413



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