



REACHING *for the* TOP

A homegrown Alberta meat processor takes a well-measured aim at a bigger slice of the market pie

Plant manager Jason Calvert of Mountain Top Foods shows off some of the corrugated shipping boxes supplied by Smurfit-MBI for the firm's retail products.

It's a long way to the top in just about any industry out there, but taking advantage of opportunities when they come your way can make that road much smoother and more enjoyable.

At least that's how things more or less unfolded so far for the folks at **Mountain Top Foods Ltd.**—a small meat-processing plant located an hour south of Calgary, Alta., in the picturesque town of Nanton.

Originally founded in 1994 under the name of **Three City Foods**, the one-time modest beef-jerky producer has covered a lot of ground in the years since to become a fully-fledged, *HACCP* (*Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points*)-approved meat processor with promising growth potential.

Owned by a local couple Kin and Sylvia Leong and their six daughters, the company still duly honors its beef-jerky roots, producing a range of tasty, salty, dried beef-strips, which can be stored for prolonged periods of time with no refrigeration, for the thriving local tourist trade.

But there's much more to the company now, explains Mountain Top plant manager Jason Calvert, a husband of one of the company's co-owners.

"At the beginning, Three City Foods was creating the product in a provincial meat-processing plant, which means we were pretty much restricted to selling the beef-jerky locally," Calvert recalls.

"It wasn't until we purchased the federally-inspected meat-processing facility here in Nanton in December of 2001 that Mountain Top was formed with the absorption of Three City Food."

Today, Calvert explains, the company's key production thrust lies in the processing and preparation of frozen, prepared, flavored beef, chicken and pork products—as well as various marinated raw meats—for clients in the restaurant trade.

In addition to manufacturing and packaging these products under its own company brand, Top Mountain also does a fair bit of private-label work

for clients in the foodservice industry, Calvert relates, and it's also preparing plans to launch its own *Sylvia's International Cuisine* retail brand of prepared meat dishes.

"We produce pork dry ribs; ginger beef and ginger chicken with sauce; battered sweet-and-sour pork with sauce; pineapple chicken with sauce; Thai-style chicken with sauce; chicken fingers; breaded boneless pork dry ribs; and most of the sauces that accompany our meat products," explains Calvert, saving special praise for the company's recently-launched, fast-selling *Louisiana Fire Stix* line of bite-sized pieces of tender pork or beef coated in a spicy breading.

The company has grown from eight people in 2001 to 25 employees today, according to Calvert, who says that it also managed to double its annual production output for two straight years in 2003 and 2004.

TWICE AS STRONG

"I can feel it in my bones that we are going to do it again this year," Calvert told *Canadian Packaging* in a recent interview.

According to Calvert, things have begun to change in a major way after the company got its *HACCP* certification in 2003—enabling it to develop new products, increase its production capabilities, and give a much-needed boost to the image of the Alberta meat products industry.

"Because we were now able to produce different products and able to enter different markets, we were able to go after a whole different type of customer," states Calvert.

"Sometimes they even sought us out," adds Calvert, pointing out that the company's business has grown consistently despite the periodic scares of BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) outbreaks in Canada in the last few years.

All the meat products arrive at the facility in a

raw state, according to Calvert, after which they are taken to be diced or sliced and, depending on the finished product, either fully or partially cooked.

The meat is then blast-frozen and packaged—along with a sauce package—in a plain 2-mil plastic bag, and then placed into a corrugated box before being shipped to the client.

With brisk sales and no shortage of new-product ideas, the company has invested a fair bit of its turnover into new, more productive packaging and processing equipment in recent times, according to Calvert, who says that one of its first-ever machine upgrades involved installing a new vacuum-packaging machine from St-Germain, Que.-based **Sipromac Inc.** to replace an old **Turbovac** machine used to package the beef-jerky.

In early 2006, he recounts, the company made a wise investment into the brand new **HC-120** horizontal digital carton former from **Consolidated Technologies** of Vaudreuil, Que.

"We bought an extended version of the HC-120 so that we could have two workstations instead of one," Calvert says. "We use it for boxing the pre-printed fiberboard boxes for retail applications—it's very user-friendly and it really does appear to be built to last."

To make the most of the *HC-120* machine, Mountain Top also purchased a new **SmartLase 110i** low-power CO₂ laser coder from **MARKEM Corporation** to add all the pertinent date-codes and other variable product information to the boxes right on the spot.

"So far, we haven't had any trouble with this equipment and we don't expect to, since it's a **MARKEM** machine," says Calvert, adding that the plant workers love the system's user-friendliness and easy programmability.

However, Calvert saves the biggest compliments for the precision weighing, filling and bagging

equipment from the Montreal-based **WeighPack Systems Inc.**—namely the **Vertek 750** V/F/F/S (vertical form/fill/seal) bagger with a **Unifiller Systems** piston filler, installed in the spring of 2006, following it up a **Vertek 1150** model, boasting **CombiScale** weighing equipment and conveyors, this past December.

“We first saw the WeighPack machinery at the PACex International trade-show a couple of years ago,” explains Calvert. “I was most interested in the WeighPack machinery over other systems chiefly because we could purchase a complete line with a bagger, a combination scale, and conveyor belts from one single company.

“As an added bonus, the price was quite reasonable, and they had a Canadian office we could deal with,” says Calvert. “And after seeing it work, the choice was obvious.”

IN THE BAG

The **Vertek** model baggers are designed as easy-to-use, compact machines, with the **Vertek 750** model capable of producing and sealing bags up to 7.5-inches-wide and up to 12-inches-long at speeds of up to 60-*bpm* (bags per minute), although Mountain Top runs it at a much slower 20-*bpm* rate for packaging its sauces.

For its part, the **Vertek 1150** can achieve rates of up to 45-*bpm* to make bags ranging from three- to 11.5-inches-wide and up to 18-inches-long, although it currently runs at about 30-*bpm*.

As for the low-pressure washdown, 14-head **CS-**



The Vertek 1150 V/F/F/S bagger from WeighPack was installed at the Nanton plant this past December.



The 14-head CS-145B CombiScale multihead scale ensures weighing accuracy to within one gram.

14SB CombiScale working with the **Vertek 1150**, it was designed for high-speed applications and can weigh and fill over 100 cycles per minute while still being accurate to the gram, Calvert enthuses.

“All of these machines have increased our overall efficiency and have saved us both time and money,” says Calvert. “But most importantly, they have enabled us to grab a little larger slice of the market.”

Other WeighPack equipment at the plant includes a stainless-steel, 12-inches-wide inclined infeed/cut conveyor, and a regular infeed conveyor that moves the product from the scale to the appropriate **Vertek** bagging machine.

“We’ve also got a pair of Unifiller piston fillers and a Hopper Topper,” explains Calvert. “One

Unifiller is used for packaging large bags of sauce or if we need to dispense sauce onto a product, while the other is integrated with the Vertek 750 and packages small bags of sauce—around 200 to 400 grams.”

While Calvert is well aware that Mountain Top has a lot of powerful, well-established competitors in the marketplace, he thinks the company’s smaller size can play in its favor by making it a more nimble and flexible manufacturer—capable of responding to new marketplace trends quicker.

“Sometimes the bigger and more established firms are afraid of change,” he reasons.

“We are very flexible and are willing to adapt to the customer’s demands and trends, and we will work alongside them to develop new products for the foodservice and retail markets.

“We’re not afraid to spend the extra time or a few extra bucks to remove excess fat from the meat, or to ensure that the ingredients we put into our products are always of the high-end variety,” he concludes.

“We will do whatever it takes to make sure we only put out a quality product.” □

For more information on:

WeighPack Systems Inc.	411
Sipromac Inc.	412
Consolidated Technologies	413
MARKEM Corporation	414
Unifiller Systems	415
Smurfit-MBI	416
CombiScale Inc.	417