



FLEXIBLE PACKAGING

The Olive Garden

Importer of high-end Mediterranean olives pulling its weight with made-in-Canada packaging machinery

Although they may not carry the divine manna of Greek gods depicted in the lore of ancient mythology, the Kalamata olives imported to these shores by the Toronto-based **Zeea Canada Inc.** are close enough to being truly heaven-sent creations, as far as company president Argi Dimacopoulos is concerned.

When **Canadian Packaging** visited Dimacopoulos last month at the company's tidy, 8,000-square-foot packaging plant in east-end Toronto, Dimacopoulos was at his obliging best to share an authoritative, expert opinion on what separates olives that can be truly described as gourmet delicacies from the run-of-the-mill commodity.

"We sell all types of olives, but the two main producing countries that we deal with are Greece and Spain," says Dimacopoulos, explaining Zeea Canada's ties to its parent company in Argos, Greece.

"This [east-end Toronto] plant is just one of three facilities we have here in Toronto, but our main production facility in Argos, about 100,000 square feet in size, has the capacity to process 10,000 tonnes of olives per annum, which are supplied to Zeea Canada and into the European markets.

"In Argos, we have a guy who acts like a broker—going to olive farms looking for the best fruit to purchase for us," the affable Dimacopoulos expands. "And just outside of Seville, in Spain, we have a 40-percent stake in a local olive processing facility that supplies us with all of our Spanish olives."

Employing 10 people at the Toronto packaging plant and eight at a 35,000-square-foot distribution center in Mississauga, Ont., Zeea Canada has long shipped its olives in bulk-packaging formats to both its domestic and overseas customers—until deciding to expand its packaging format two years ago with introduction of plastic pouches and four-liter pail packs.

Dimacopoulos explains that after the olives are harvested in Greece, they are brought for processing to the Argos plant—namely to be fermented in natural salt water.

The olives are then separated by size—ranging from the smallest-sized Large designation to top-of-the-scale Atlas size—and further processed into one of several end-product variations: whole, pitted, stuffed with a pimento, or sliced.

The olives are then packed with brine into large plastic barrels and shipped overseas to Canada, where Zeea repackages them into Canadian market-compatible formats with top-notch filling equipment manufactured by the Montreal-based food packaging specialists **WeighPack Systems Inc.**

"After we receive the olives in the bulk drums, we



Zeea Canada Inc. president Argi Dimacopoulos (left) and production manager Jordan Sebben stand in front of big plastic barrels of fresh olives shipped in from Argos, Greece.

dump them into a Weighpack Vibratory Hopper," Dimacopoulos elaborates. "The olives then go onto a WeighPack 18-inch infeed conveyor that feeds the twin-head, triple-pan V9 vibratory Tiger Scale, also made by WeighPack."

The comprehensive **Tiger Scale V-Series** systems were designed by WeighPack to handle weighments ranging from just five grams to bulk weights of up to 100 pounds—depending on the model—providing a perfectly versatile solution for Zeea's three-lane configuration, which can be expanded to four lanes thanks to its modular design.

While Zeea Canada currently only uses the system

to fill bags ranging from 500 grams to 12 kilograms,

Dimacopoulos says the plant can use the same equipment to package bigger-sized bags in the future, if market demand warrants it.

IN THE BAG

All of the **V-Series** scales feature WeighPack's patented, user-friendly **Multi-Trix** control panel, and they can be easily rolled to a production line or mounted on all types of auxiliary equipment.

The **Multi-Trix** provides a multitude of productivity-enhancing features—auto-calibration, auto-tare, active production output screen, recipe screen, etc.—and is outfitted with easily removable product-contact parts and stainless-steel tubing for all its frames, helping satisfy all the pertinent **HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points)** regulatory criteria for food safety.

Once the selected target weight is programmed into the **Multi-Trix**, the right-sized olives are released into the WeighPack **Vertek 1150** VFFS (vertical form/fill/seal bagger, which can produce and seal polyethylene bags at robust speeds of up to 60 bags per minute.

"We run our bagger five-days-a-week, at an average speed of 30 bags per minute—helping us package about 10 tonnes of olives a day," says Dimacopoulos, adding he has nothing but high praise for the WeighPack machines installed in January of 2005.

"We are always updating our equipment because we like to stay on the cutting edge of technology," Dimacopoulos asserts. "And with WeighPack machines we can do that while cutting back on waste—thereby saving us money."

Just as important, plant employees have been very pleased with reliability and user-friendliness of the



The freshly-processed, imported olives are packaged into bags filled with a brine solution on a packaging line equipped with a broad range of high-performance WeighPack machinery.

WeighPack systems, he adds, as well as the quick and professional service from WeighPack to back them up.

After the plastic bags are filled with olives and the sweet-and-salty brine solution—allowing the olives to remain safely edible up to a full year—they are passed through the **Phantom** metal detection system, manufactured by the Toronto-based **Fortress Technology Inc.**

The inspected bags are then placed onto an accumulation table—to be hand-packed into the the **K-Brite** white-top linerboard boxes manufactured by Montreal-based paper products group **Kruger Inc.**

From there, the olives are either shipped to Mississauga for storage or directly to one of the company's clients, comprised largely of restaurant franchises and institutional foodservice suppliers.

"We also produce our own brand of olives, called Zeea, as well as do co-packing for quite a number of private-label clients," adds Dimacopoulos.

QUALITY EDGE

While Dimacopoulos says he is happy with market growth and penetration achieved by Zeea's Canadian operation since its startup 10 years ago, he is adamant not to let the company be lulled into the complacency trap.

"Our industry is very competitive," he states, "but we stand out amongst our competitors because the quality of our product cannot be matched."

Dimacopoulos explains that many competitors use

the inferior-tasting, Spanish-grown olives that are simply dyed black to mimic the naturally-processed and ripened Kalamata olives, which are left to ripen on the tree until they turn from green to black naturally.

"One way to spot a dyed black olive is to see if the color is uniform from olive to olive," he expands. "The naturally black olives will vary in color from a light-brown to black, including

reddish and purplish hues, sometimes all on the same piece of fruit."

Dimacopoulos adds that Zeea also stands out from competition in the way its prepares its sliced olives—namely ensuring that no loose olive ends get into any of the packages.

"We feel that if you are paying for sliced olives, that is exactly what you should get," he says. "But we don't waste the ends; we turn them into an olive paste called *pasta elias*, which is a very tasty bread spread made with olives, garlic, oil and vinegar.

"Zeea has succeeded by providing its customers with consistently high-quality olives, while offering them uninterrupted supply and constant pricing," Dimacopoulos sums up.

"In the world of olives, this is not an easy task for a manufacturer to accomplish, but that is why we are the best at what we do." □



After weighing, the olives are packaged in plastic pouches or four-liter plastic pails, before being hand-packed into linerboard cartons produced by Kruger Inc.

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