

Western Weighs

"Between the ambient fresh air and the natural freshness of the produce we process here, your taste buds can really get worked up"

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West Coast produce processor and packer keeps extending its market reach thanks to strategic capital investments in packaging machinery and know-how

The beautiful British Columbia has far more than its fair share of natural, awe-inspiring charms—especially along the coast—but even before the majestic mountains and the Pacific Ocean get a chance to overwhelm the casual visitor to Vancouver, the incomparably fresh air usually does the trick literally within minutes of arrival to Canada's West Coast jewel.

It's simply everywhere, all the time: at home, at work, at play, you name it. Vancouver, in fact, is a hopeless business proposition for anyone in the air-conditioning business, but for companies like **Four Seasons Food Ltd.**, a vegetable processor and packaging operation tucked inconspicuously in an industrial-park setting just south of the city's international airport, freshness is the very cornerstone and competitive advantage of the company's success.

"I'm kind of used to it myself, but almost everyone who walks in here for the first time comments on how fresh and nice it smells in here, you just don't feel like you're inside a processing plant," says the company's youthful, 31-year-old president and chief operating officer Ron Chan. "Between the ambient fresh air and the natural freshness of the produce we process here, your taste buds can really get worked up."

Founded as a small, family-owned enterprise in 1983, the company's knack for delivering honest-to-goodness produce freshness into the kitchens of local restaurants and grocery stores quickly wetted the appetites of Houston, Tex.-based food distribution giant **SYSCO Corporation**, which acquired Four Seasons in 1987.



With solid corporate financial backing and distribution know-how in place, Four Seasons steadily but surely expanded its market reach well into the neighboring State of Washington to the south and as far as Alberta-Manitoba border to the west—a feat made all the more remarkable by the fact that most of the produce shipped to the Four Seasons plant comes from California.

"Being part of large company like SYSCO has many advantages, and one key advantage is their vast and efficient distribution system," Chan explained during a recent *Canadian Packaging* tour of the 30,000-square-foot facility. "They handle all the key logistics, which leaves us free to concentrate on expanding our production volumes and our product line."

Which is exactly where the packaging function comes to play a very key and central role at the three-shift, around-the-clock, 85-employee operation, according to Chan.

"What we essentially do here is add value to the produce by cleaning it, trimming it, and packaging it. Obviously, packaging plays a very important role: it is part and parcel of our HACCP and safety program," Chan explains. "Everything has to be packaged in a way that keeps the product away from any external foreign matters.

"Also, the extension of the shelf-life of our products depends directly on the packaging. After the vegetables are cut, we have to keep the air out of the package so that the product does not begin to oxidize, discolor or rot.

"Packaging also plays a vital part in the sale of our product," Chan adds. "When we package the product so that it keeps its integrity by holding up its texture and color, we're able to ship this product that much further geographically ... so it plays a huge role in our sales."

If results speak for themselves, then Chan and his



Ron Chan, President and COO,
Four Seasons Food Ltd.

employees certainly know what they're doing insofar as packaging goes. Of the 15 or so varieties of vegetables handled at the facility, Four Seasons manages to crank out about 180 different products, which find their way to everything from supermarket shelves at **IGA**, **Safeway** and **Cosco**—in form of **Garden Greens** and **Fresh from the Garden** salad mixes—to the fast-food kitchens of **Wendy's** and **Pizza Hut**—and onto the dinner tables of a wildly popular West Coast family restaurant chain **Earl's**.

"We move roughly around 6,500 packages a day, five pounds on average, which adds up to about 30,000 to 40,000 pounds of product," says Chan. "We do all kinds of packages: from two-pound veggie mixes to 25-pound packs that go out to industrial customers like Canyon Creek Soups in Edmonton, to whom we ship bags of diced carrots, onion and tomatoes, which they then use to make soups for their own foodservice customers."

To handle all that volume, the plant has four dedicated packaging lines, as well as the so-called "repack line"—where 25-pound cartons of fresh produce are quickly broken down to five-pound bags without any cutting or other type of prep work, and then sent directly to foodservice and retail customers.

Three of the four packaging lines are almost all-manual lines dedicated for the production of custom salad mixes, while the remaining line, utilized for "longer-run mixes," features the company's most extensive and comprehensive capital investment in packaging machinery to date.

The equipment on this line, purchased about 18 months ago from Montreal-based machinery manufac-



Packaging for Freshness

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turer WeighPack Systems Inc. (a division of Paxiom Group), includes:

- a 24-inch infeed conveyor;
- a twin-head Multi-TriX, model AEF-9 automatic scale with conveyORIZED transfer belt and vibratory bulk and dribble capabilities;
- model Vertek 1150 vertical form/fill/seal bagger;
- and an exit conveyor for transferring the sealed bags to the end of the line.

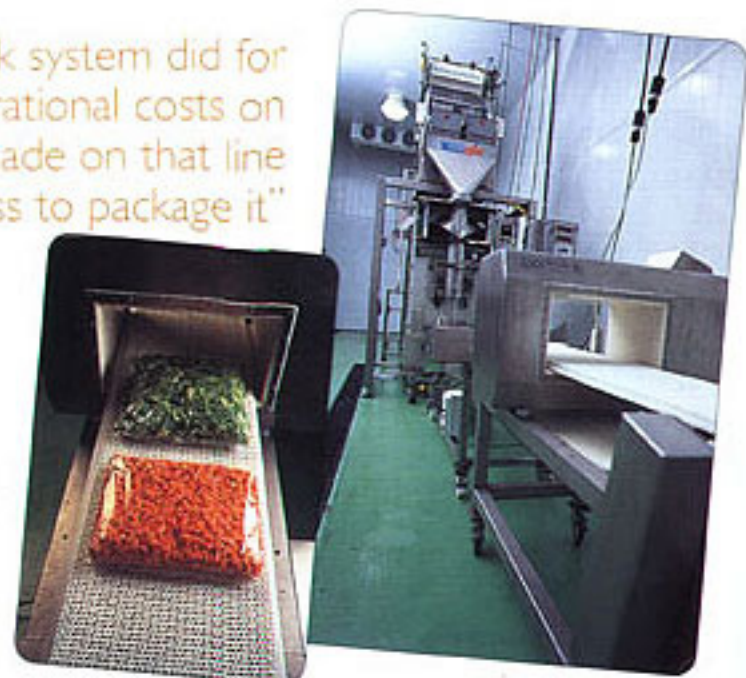
"We looked at other machines and systems out there, but we finally settled on WeighPack. One of the main reasons was that the machine was Canadian-made; secondly, because the system uses off-the-shelf-type components, the parts would be readily available, so that I could send out a technician when necessary and he'd be back with the needed parts in an hour or so," recalls

Chan. "Also, the pricing was very sharp, very competitive."

After a year and a half of service, Chan says he's generally quite happy with the system's performance.

"At times, there are little burps on the radar screen, but mostly it's just the regular wear-and-tear," he says. "It's nothing that preventive maintenance or a similar program couldn't take care of."

"We use this machine 10 to 12 hours a day, so it's a workhorse. Any downtime we had was just for minor things like a burned fuse or a burned-out motor on a conveyor belt. Nothing that couldn't be fixed quickly and nothing to shut down the line for an extended period of time."



Which is all music to the ears of Charles Nadeau, WeighPack's territory manager for western Canada.

"The Four Seasons case is a perfect case in point why no two machines are really the same in two different situations. What we had here was a relatively mid-sized company clearly headed for bigger and better things, so the challenge was not just to give them something to take care of their current needs, but also to provide system flexibility to accommodate near-term growth," Nadeau says.

"They (Four Seasons) are doing terrific stuff out there."

It was not always quite so.

Recalls Chan: "Before, it was all done by hand. We used pre-made bags, with the operator actually opening up the bag, putting the product inside the bag, and then sealing it with an old-fashioned vacuum-pack machine."

"It took a lot of labor and it took a lot of time to insert the product in the bag, to weigh it, and then add or take out product to get to the correct weight."

"And with [production] volume picking up, and we simply needed better productivity, we needed to be more efficient on the packaging line, so we needed to switch to a more automated system. We had to have one."

While Chan refuses to divulge any hard data or numbers on just how much the productivity at For Seasons improved or whether the company actually tracks such stuff—it's just not really the West Coast way, you know—he's more than agreeable to share an workplace anecdote as proof.

"For instance, we've experienced tremendous growth on our diced onion product line since installing this machine," he says. "Frankly, I don't know whether it's because the bag looks more uniform and professional than when it was done by hand or what, that's all up to customers to decide, but there is a whole lot less labor now when it comes to packaging diced onions. Believe it or not, they (diced onions) are one of our current bestsellers."

"In the long run, what the WeighPack system did for us was allow us to reduce our operational costs on the packaging line and, consequently, sell our product made on that line at a more competitive price because it now costs us less to package it."

"And, in the long run, that's what it's all about in this business." □

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