



Left: The Xpdius Elite 1200 vertical form/fill/seal bagger from WeighPack Systems is the latest high-tech equipment purchased by Expresco that the frozen-meats producer has successfully utilized to enter a new segment of the retail market.

Below: George Tiritidis, vice-president operations for the Montreal-based Expresco Foods, shows off some of the tasty and healthy meat products that the company processes and packages for foodservice and retail markets across North America.



# ON CUTTING EDGE

Montreal meat processor hits the packaging sweet spot with high-performance, fully-automated, made-in-Canada bagging machinery

It's no secret that the North American meat processing industry is as fiercely competitive today as any other major industry out there—requiring companies in the meat business to keep developing innovative new marketing and manufacturing strategies and ideas to defend their market turf and stay ahead of the competition.

Just like **Expresco Foods Inc.** is doing—having successfully carved out itself a promising market niche by producing high-quality, easy-to-prepare, healthy meal solutions that has consumers from coast to coast licking their lips in anticipation of every meal featuring appetizing, flavorful cuts of chicken, beef and pork processed and packaged at the company's state-of-the-art, 50,000-square-foot production facility in Montreal.

"Competition is always going to be there, so what we need to do continuously is to be innovative and strive to always offer the best-tasting product at a great value," says Expresco's vice-president of operations George Tiritidis.

"It's all a part of the evolution of a business: You must continue to improve via innovation, while surrounding yourself with a dedicated team of people who are truly focused on the company's goals."

It's a recipe that has done wonders for a company with fairly modest and inauspicious beginnings, as Tiritidis told *Canadian Packaging* in a recent interview.

"When we first opened our doors for business in 1986,

Expresco was solely a contract packager processing and packaging raw product for some nearby foodservice customers," Tiritidis recalls. "Nowadays, the company ships 20 per cent of its product to the U.S., with the rest of our production shipped right across Canada."

Boasting just about every pertinent industry accreditation—including *HACCP* (*Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point*) certification and validations from both the **CFIA** (**Canadian Food Inspection Agency**) and the **USDA** (**United States Department of Agriculture**)—the Montreal plant today runs a two-shift, five-days-per-week schedule to process over 50,000 kilograms of meat products per week.

## BON APPÉTIT

Tiritidis says Expresco receives deboned cuts and slabs of raw meat shipped in from across North America to turn out a tantalizing selection of pre-cut, marinated, skewered and other prep frozen meats.

"We produce marinated skewers, appetizer-sized satays using both raw and cooked pork beef, chicken and beef, as well as fully-cooked beef and chicken strips and cooked, portion-controlled chicken breasts for both foodservice and retail markets all across North America," Tiritidis explains.



After the primary packaging stage, all the meat products are weighed by a Loma AS checkweigher with an infeed conveyor.

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## ON CUTTING EDGE

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According to Tiritidis, Expresco got a major boost back in 2007 when it teamed up with cold-storage specialists **Entrepôt Frigorifique International Inc. (International Cold Storage Inc.)**—constructing its new factory right next door to Entrepôt’s sprawling, 100,000-square-foot freezer facility to optimize its distribution and operational efficiencies, while also taking advantage of additional value-added services such as order-picking.

The move also prompted Expresco to expand its capabilities beyond the private-label sector by launching its own flagship retail brands—**Expresco** and **WestEnd Cuisine**—which are distributed nationally through the **Costco Wholesale Canada Ltd.** chain.

Despite offering only three retail product lines for now—fully-cooked beef and chicken strips in eastern Canada, and fully-cooked satays in the western provinces—Tiritidis estimates that the branded products now account for about 25 per cent of the company’s annual sales of over \$30 million.

### HIGH VOLUME

The other revenues are mostly generated by the higher-volume, private-label co-packing work Expresco does for Costco and **Loblaw Companies** in Canada, Tiritidis relates, as well as for **Trader Joe’s** in the U.S.—keeping the plant’s three principal production lines, one for raw meat and two for cooked products, busy throughout the year.

Tiritidis says Expresco enjoys a very collaborative working relationship with its high-profile customers—crediting its close rapport with Loblaw’s for playing a key role behind the recent launch of an innovative pre-packaged food product retailing under the grocer’s **President’s Choice** store-brand banner.

The new meal-in-a-bag product—a 680-gram flexible stand-up pouch containing a 100-gram clear bag of fully-

cooked chicken strips inserted into a flavored pasta or rice mixture—can be turned into a hot, ready-to-eat meal by combining and cooking the meat with the starch, either on stovetop or in a microwave, in about 10 minutes.

“We work with another company that manufactures ready-made pasta and risotto,” explains Tiritidis.

“They ship the stuff to us, and we assemble and package it by placing a small inner pouch of our fully-cooked chicken strips inside a beautifully-printed, 680-gram flexible package right here at our plant.

“It is mainly through our custom work, serving customers like Loblaw’s with innovative products such as this flexible package, where Expresco is able to define itself as a truly unique company,” Tiritidis asserts.

But while cooking the product—offered in *Grilled Chicken Alfredo* pasta and *Grilled Chicken Asparagus Risotto* recipes—may seem like simplicity itself, the actual packaging of this popular store brand is a much more involved endeavor.

To get the packaging just right, Expresco approached **WeighPack Systems Inc.**—Montreal-based, globally-operating manufacturer of packaging equipment for food-and-beverage, hardware goods, pharmaceutical and consumer electronics industries—to propose an optimal packaging solution for the new product line.

Recounts Tiritidis: “In an effort to enter a new segment



An operator places thermoformed packs of meat into a paperboard box erected by the HC 120 cartoner from Consolidated Technologies.

of the retail market, we began looking for a bagging machine that could help us produce smaller portion sizes of our fully-cooked strip line.”

After extensive consultations, in September of 2009 Expresco proceeded to purchase and install WeighPack’s **Xpdius Elite 1200** vertical form/fill/seal (V/F/F/S) bagging machine—engineered specifically for high-speed packaging applications that can handle bag sizes up to 12-inches-wide and 16 inches in length at a maximum speed of 90 cpm (cycles per minute).

Tiritidis says he was very impressed with the wide array of productivity-enhancing features offered by the *Xpdius Elite* series of baggers, including: an articulated control panel for operator ease-of-use; a color touchscreen HMI (human-machine interface) terminal; auto-retracting film assembly; encoder unwind length control; mechanical



Machine operators monitoring one of two Repack RE20/5 thermoforming systems used by Expresco to package satays, strips and marinated meat skewers for both its raw and cooked product lines.





Maintenance technician Khalid Fazroun uses the operator-friendly color touchscreen HMI to program the WeighPack Xpdus Elite 1200.

film brake mechanism; motorized film unwind rollers; pneumatic horizontal sealing bars and a vertical sealing bar; servo-driven pull belt and sealing jaws; variable temperature control; and a splicing table for facilitating fast product changeover.

Combined with WeighPack's newly-redesigned 14-head **Primo Combination Multi-Head Weigher**—featuring 2.5-liter buckets that achieve dispensing accuracy within a gram even at speeds of up to 120 cpm—the *Xpdus Elite* has more than met the challenge of enabling Expresco to pack the 100-gram bags of cooked meat strips at speeds of over 80 cpm, according to Tiritidis, who also credits WeighPack's proximity and the quality of its strong technical staff for helping seal the deal.

#### CLOSE CALL

"I certainly do appreciate the fact that the *Xpdus Elite* 1200 has made us more labor-efficient on the packaging side of our cooked meats department," he says, "but it was also important for us to have good Canadian service representation located just minutes from our facility.

"Not that we have had to actually call on them with any problems yet."

After the filled flexible pouches come off the *Xpdus Elite* 1200 machine, they run past a **Domino A200+** high performance inkjet coder to have all the pertinent lot and date information applied, followed by a final quality assurance check administered by a **Loma IQ<sup>2</sup>** metal detection system, and a conveyor transfer to an adjoining room to be packed into corrugated cartons for shipment to customers.

As for other primary packaging performed at the Montreal plant, Expresco makes extensive use of a pair of model **Repak RE20/5** horizontal thermoform packaging

"We're a company that is truly focused on continuous improvement—not only in terms of our product offerings, but also in how we manufacture and package them."

machines that the company bought from renowned food processing and packaging machinery specialists **Reiser (Canada) Limited** of Burlington, Ont.

"We purchased our first Repak in 2005 and the second one in 2008, for our raw and cooked-meat lines respectively, as our requirements for production capacity increased both in the retail and foodservice sectors," Tiritidis recounts.

"They both run anywhere between eight to 12 cycles per minute, depending on the pack format."

Manufactured in The Netherlands, the low-noise, energy-efficient *Repak RE20* thermoforming system is a highly versatile machine that can meet a broad range of packaging applications—from straightforward rigid-film packaging to producing unique packages for different-shaped products.

Each of the *Repaks* at the Expresco plant is integrated with a model **GB-100B** inkjet coder—manufactured by **Greydon, Inc.**—for inline application of all the required lot, best-before and any other variable product data.

"Both machines have been working very well for us," states Tiritidis.

"When our increase in production necessitated an installation of a second thermoformer, we saw no reason for us to switch brands because the first one was working out so well," adds Tiritidis, while also singling out several other key packaging systems and suppliers for special praise, including:

- **Winpack Ltd.**, supplier of packaging films used for both *Repak* machines and the *Xpdus* system;
- **Norampac**, a division of **Cascades Canada Inc.** supplying the plant with corrugated shipping cartons;
- **Domino Printing Solutions**, which supplied two model **C6000+** inkjet printers for outer case-coding of the corrugated carriers;
- **Consolidated Technologies**, which supplied a model



WeighPack's redesigned 14-head Primo Combination Multi-Head Weigher accurately dispenses chicken strips into the Xpdus Elite 1200 vertical bagger positioned underneath.

**HC 120** cartoner back in 2001 for erecting, closing and gluing master cartons—at speeds of 15-cpm to 25-cpm—after Expresco's expansion into the retail markets;

- **Mettler-Toledo Safeline**, manufacturer of the **POWERPHASE** metal detection system used for inspecting all the raw meat products;
- **CHEP Equipment Pooling Systems**, supplier of shipping pallets to the plant.



Expresco worker moves a large skid of prepared meat products, packed in Norampac corrugated cartons, into a refrigerated area.

"Expresco has become an industry leader in providing high-quality, portion-controlled, fully-cooked, conveniently packaged products that offer great overall value—all made by a great team of dedicated professionals," sums up Tiritidis.

"We're a company that is truly focused on continuous improvement—not only in terms of our product offerings, but also in how we manufacture and package them.

"With the equipment and people we have in place," he concludes, "I think that we are very well-positioned to take things up yet another notch or two." 🍁



A master carton containing boxes of frozen seasoned chicken kebobs has lot code data applied to it by a Domino C6000+ inkjet printer.

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION ON:

<b>WeighPack Systems Inc.</b>	<b>440</b>
<b>Reiser (Canada) Limited</b>	<b>441</b>
<b>Greydon, Inc.</b>	<b>442</b>
<b>Domino Printing Solutions</b>	<b>443</b>
<b>Loma Systems (Canada) Inc.</b>	<b>444</b>
<b>Winpack Ltd.</b>	<b>445</b>
<b>Norampac</b>	<b>446</b>
<b>Consolidated Technologies</b>	<b>447</b>
<b>Mettler-Toledo, Canada</b>	<b>448</b>
<b>CHEP Equipment Pooling Systems</b>	<b>449</b>