

STEADY AS IT GROWS

Ontario produce packer speeds up production line efficiencies

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PHOTOS BY MAX WEDGE

Ever since mankind began walking upright - and perhaps even before that - human beings have made vegetables a main part of their diet.

Nowadays, everyone is well aware that vegetables provide vital health benefits - such as reduction in some chronic diseases - by delivering much-needed nutrients vital for the health and maintenance of one's body.

Despite that, there are many people, including grown-ups who should know better and children alike, who try to avoid them the best they can.

It often seems like running a cross-generational challenge of continuously having to enlighten the prodigy that vegetables are indeed a necessary part of a healthy diet.

Happily, this ageless wisdom is being picked up by many modern families insisting on not only providing a more healthy dietary base but doing so with the freshest vegetables they can find.

And, with most common vegetables being naturally low in fat and calories - and none contain cholesterol - it's naturally a good time to be involved in the business of producing vegetables.

Situated in the municipality of Leamington, Ont. close to the southernmost

part of the province, **Lakeside Produce** is a family-owned grower, packer and shipper of produce that not only seeks to provide top-quality veggies, but to do so following some of the most rigorous food-safety and handling standards in the industry.

The ongoing success of Lakeside Produce has recently acquired greater importance in Leamington area, the domain of a massive **H.J. Heinz Company** factory, and consequently widely renowned as the "Tomato Capital of Canada".

In light of the Heinz plants closure this past May, it is now up to companies like Lakeside Produce to maintain the region's mythical status.

Lakeside Produce is a successful fourth-generation-run Cervini family-owned operation that primarily produces tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers sold in over 100 SKUs (stock-keeping units), getting its start in 1943, when Antonio Cervini purchased a 10-acre plot of land in the area.

With acreage expansion and field and greenhouse production increasing over the years, grandson Anthony became one of the first farmers to utilize computers to operate greenhouse growing facilities.

With brothers Chris and John running the business for the past 20 years, Chris recently assumed the position as lone owner and



Holding a clamshell pack of grape tomatoes, Chris Cervini is the owner of Lakeside Produce, a fourth generation family operated vegetable growing operation in Leamington, Ont.

operator of the company, with the family's long-nurtured affection for the industry well-evidenced throughout the enterprise.

"Growing up, I literally had vegetables in my blood and dirt from farming under my fingernails," Chris Cervini told **Canadian Packaging** during a recent interview. "But having said that, Lakeside Produce is not just your typical farm and processor."

Cervini explains that the company primarily specializes in producing bell peppers, beefsteak tomatoes and seedless cucumbers, which it offers for retail sale, offering them in a broad variety of packaging formats.

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- Sweet bell peppers come in red, yellow, orange and green varieties, which are available in bulk format in 11-pound corrugated cartons, as well as in three- and four-count flowwrapped, recycled food-grade poly film that provides a longer shelf-life;
- Vine-ripened beefsteak tomatoes - considered to be the ideal sandwich tomato owing to its structure that holds up well when sliced - are packed in a 15-pound RPC (reusable plastic containers) tote format, with an added recycled foam liner, a four-count #1 RPET (post-consumer recycled PET) clamshell, and in 15-pound 100-percent kraft boxes with a

recycled plastic liner;

- Sweet-tasting tomatoes-on-the-vine, are medium-sized tomatoes grown in clusters, and are available in polybags; biodegradable mesh bags; 11-pound kraft boxes with a recyclable plastic liner, and a 13-pound RPC tote with recycled foam liner;
- Featuring a crisp texture, Lakeside's seedless cucumbers are available in individual wraps, as well as in two- and three-pack poly film bags; and 12-count packs of small-, medium- and large-sized veggies in kraft containers;
- Mini-cucumbers, are sweeter than the larger variety, available in a two-pound resealable clear perforated film bags; and six- and eight-count degradable foam trays with a degradable food-grade film covering both the veggies and the trays.

Says Cervini: "Along with these well-received vegetables, we also offer some exclusive varieties, which we top off with some innovative packaging."

These exclusive varieties include:

- **Stramato**, a strawberry-shaped sweet tomato packed in nine-ounce #1 RPET clamshells;
- **Rubies Sweet Grape Tomatoes** - sweet but healthy - available in one-pint and two-pound #1 RPET clamshells;
- **Red Delights** cocktail tomato packed in one-pound RPET clamshells
- **Heirloom Tomatoes** with its balance of sweetness and acidity packed in 15-pound RPC plastic totes and 10-pound kraft boxes;
- **Solo Sweet Bell Peppers**, individually flow-wrapped in respiration-controlled, 100 per cent recyclable polypropylene film to capture its color and quality over an extended shelf life, and;
- **Baby Eggplant**, with its delicate skin and sweet flavor and melting consistency that makes it ideal for grilling, available in 11-pound kraft boxes for the Fancy and Graffiti varieties.

Currently, the Lakeside Produce production is housed within a 70,000-square-foot facility, with 180 full-time employees and an additional 75 contract workers. The company also possess an additional 30 acres of its own greenhouse used to grow organic veggies, and according to Cervini, Lakeside Produce is also in the process of a major enlargement to its facility.

"By the time November of 2014 rolls around, we will have increased our warehouse space by an additional 45,000-square-foot warehousing and 30,000 square feet of mezzanine space for productions," Cervini reveals.

Thanks to the greenhouse operations in Leamington and Guadalajara, Mexico, Lakeside Produce is able to bring customers high-quality produce every day of the year, according to Cervini.

"Every time is busy time for us," Cervini points out. "In the winter, we get incoming product from Mexico, while summer is busy with our own greenhouse production and our growing partners."

With some 20 percent of its vegetables packed for private-label customers, the company's client-base comprises foodservice and retail operators throughout North America, with the latter accounting for the higher percentage of its output.



Tomatoes travel up a vertical WeighPack Incline Infeed Conveyor and are deposited in a PrimoCombi weigher.

PACKING IT IN

The daily production process of Lakeside Produce begins with harvesting vegetables from its greenhouses, which are carefully placed into picking carts that are then moved into a packaging shed, to be packaged into the various pack styles.

Says Cervini: "All of our produce is packed to only the highest of

quality standards.

“We are proud to achieve this lofty goal by using the latest in packaging equipment technologies and with the expertise of our experienced employees.”

All of the Lakeside Produce packaging lines feed into the company’s automated PTI (Product Traceability Initiative) line that is designed to accurately - and quickly - identify the pack style using a vision system, as well as auto-applying the PTI label directly onto a master carton.

One of the company’s most recently installed fill lines, is a turnkey packaging solution comprising technologies from WeighPack and Lakewood that Cervini says can accurately fill grape tomatoes or mini peppers into clamshell packaging or into bags to within two to four grams of the desired weight.

“It’s an impressive line,” says Cervini, adding that with the Lakewood components, “the line allows us to wash, grade, easily size product and auto-dispense clamshell packs onto the line before filling via the PrimoCombi, and then automatically closing and labeling the lid.”

THE PERFECT WEIGHT

Purchased in November of 2013, WeighPack’s solution consists of the industry-respected PrimoCombi, a 14-head weigher claimed to represent the next generation of combination weighing technology.

“The PrimoCombi weigher system offers us high-speed and accuracy when weighing our ruby tomatoes into 10-ounce and two-pound clamshells,” says Cervini. “It has 14 scales, which provides many different combinations, and provides us with greater accuracy of product weight in our packs.”

WeighPack’s territory manager Mark Conforti fondly recalls the opportunity to demonstrate the company’s solutions for Lakeside Produce at WeighPack’s world-class Las Vegas Systems Center facility.

“We demonstrated the wide range of products we have on display, and focused in on the PrimoCombi for their application,” recounts Conforti.

“This provided the best opportunity to truly appreciate not only the technology and quality packaging machinery that WeighPack manufactures, but also prove that our PrimoCombi multi-head weigher



Lakeside Produce utilizes a PrimoCombi weigher manufactured by WeighPack Systems to provide accurate product levels for its grape tomatoes packaged in plastic clamshell packs.

will provide better accuracy than the traditional linear net weighing scales commonly used in the tomato industry.”

The companies began working together over several months to incorporate the PrimoCombi multihead weigher and ***Incline Infeed Conveyor*** into Lakeside Produce’s production line to automatically weigh and fill from one pint up to two-pounds of grape tomatoes.

The project included the integration of WeighPack’s high-speed, servo-driven ***XPdius i-130 V/F/F/S*** (vertical form, fill, and seal) bagging system into the line to accommodate production of pillow-style pouches in the future.

According to Conforti, WeighPack designed, engineered and manufactured the PrimoCombi packaging system to operate at speeds of 40 to 50 clamshell trays per minute with a single dispensing station.

“It was crucial that the line be designed with product safety in mind, including minimal drop points and softer transition points to help eliminate product bruising,” explain Conforti.

“Most importantly, we added a product stopper to the inside transitioning of the PrimoCombi to reduce the drop height and velocity of the product flow into the clamshells.”

The PrimoCombi multihead weigher is the first open-frame CAN-BUS wired combination scale that houses all electronics from one central electrical enclosure, which reduces electrical components by up to 80 per cent and cost of ownership, according to WeighPack, while the open-frame design is easier to clean, easier to service and easier to perform product changeovers.

The PrimoCombi system utilizes ***Windows*** PC controls, that are embedded with ***Crystal Reports***, ***Skype***, and ***LogMeIn.com*** capabilities for free online support, customizes reporting, automatic triggers and other key functionalities.

“It was a real pleasure working with the team at Lakeside Produce,” relates Conforti. “They had a plan and a vision that they were able to clearly articulate, which in turn made it easy for us to understand their needs and expectations,” relates Conforti.

Being hands-on involved with Mother Nature, the folks at Lakeside Produce are naturally very keen on following sustainability initiatives to keep their operation as ecologically green as possible.



Freshly-picked grape-sized tomatoes are quickly and delicately dispersed through the WeighPack Systems PrimoCombi14-head weigher to lightly dropped into a waiting clamshell pack below.

The company practices a strictly-observed Green Focus, a continuous, three-step program that hones in on Lakeside Produce's green growing practices, sustainable packaging usage, and the manner in which its products are responsibly distributed.

"Regarding our growing practices," explains Cervini, "we have always strived to be environmentally responsible, and we consider ourselves an industry leader in adopting green policies."

To support his claim, Cervini says the company uses actual bumblebees to pollinate the plants; small, harmless wasps rather than pesticides to keep the produce safe; heavy-duty scrubbers to clean CO₂ (carbon-dioxide) emissions that are then recycled back into the greenhouses; and reusable rockwool (stone wool fiber made from molten rock) to grow the plants in, results in reduced growing costs, increased crop yields, and is recyclable.

Lakeside Produce, uses a computer-controlled system in its greenhouses to dispense exact amounts of nutrients, water and CO₂ for maximum plant growth, with the water and nutrients dispersed via a specially-designed water recycling system.

"Our plastic clamshell packaging is manufactured from recycled material that is recyclable," mentions Cervini. "As an added bonus, it provides our vegetables with great barrier protection and an increased shelf life."

Lakeside Produce has also implemented a continuous practice to try and streamline its operations to use as little packaging materials as possible, including the use of using recyclable plastic containers for shipping.

Moreover, the company's letterhead, promotional materials and product ID cards are all printed on recycled stock, while

point-of-sale materials have been recorded on DVDs in order to minimize paper waste.

Cervini says the company's international distribution network is a fine-tuned, computer-controlled system that works with an integrated inventory control software to make sure it can provide the most efficient delivery method possible.

"We maximize our freight trucks to keep the carbon footprint lighter, and have our drivers work in teams to ensure delivery is safe for them, while maintaining efficiency," explains Cervini. "We have also installed GPS (Global Position System) on our vehicles to optimize routing and dispatching for better fuel efficiency, while also providing us with automatic maintenance reports and alerts to ensure our trucks are safe and operating efficiently," explains Cervini.

The company also maintains a distribution network across North America that not only allows it to offer customers fresh produce year-round, but also enables it to significantly reduce shipping costs and travel distances.

"We've even added side skirts to our highway trailers to reduce drag and provide increased fuel efficiency," Cervini points out.

To top it all off, all the vegetables and organic matter deemed unsatisfactory for consumer use is sent to Seacliff Energy, a nearby natural gas plant, that takes all of the organic material and composts it in a bio digester to make liquid fertilizer, while generating electricity from heat produced by the composting process.

Cervini says, "Dealing with vegetables is all about being green in every sense of the word." ●



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