



THE NUTS AND BOLTS

West Coast nut processor achieves standout stand-up packaging with fully-automatic bagging machinery

ANDREW JOSEPH, FEATURES EDITOR
PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER GRABOWSKI

Widely considered to be one of the longest-enduring human dietary staples, nuts, beans and pulse crops have been around for so long—about 5,000 years for pulses, 7,000 years for beans and an astounding 780,000 years for nuts, according to some recent archaeological finds—that modern-day packaging for these types of products may seem like an unnecessary luxury to some.

But for Hamid Gamini, co-owner and general manager of the Richmond, B.C.-based **NaturaPack Foods Inc.**, there is nothing wrong with adding a little contemporary packaging pizzazz and convenience to an important, healthy food group that is far too often hidden out of sight and out of mind in the supermarkets' rather anonymous and easy-to-miss bulk bins in the back of the produce section, while also throwing a bit of welcome consumer education and awareness into the mix.

"It was obvious to us that the consumers purchasing bulk foods at supermarkets don't really always know just what they are purchasing," Gamini told *Canadian Packaging* in a recent interview describing the company's startup in May of 2011.

"Bulk food packaging contains no real data for the consumer to study; in fact, no one even knows for sure if the product has been handled properly according to the required health standards," Gamini points out.

Less Mess

"And from the supermarket's point of view, there is always the mess around the bins, and the cashier's time wasted, associated with bulk foods," he adds.

"And while we did not have to reinvent the wheel, we think we did come up with a novel approach to take on those challenges," says Gamini, whose startup company is situated in a 5,000-square-foot, all-in-one production, distribution and office facility currently employing five people to turn out 13 different SKUs (stock-keeping units) of two main product lines comprising pistachios and mixed nuts, and beans and pulses.

Projecting first-year sales of just under \$5 million, Gamini says the company's own flagship **A Good Portion** brand of packaged products—currently accounting for about a half of its revenues—has been well-received both by consumers and retail customers such as **IGA** and **Super Valu**, among others, while its private-label customers have been equally impressed by the company's "one-stop solution" co-packing capabilities encompassing brand establishment, graphic design, packaging materials sourcing, packing, palletizing, storage and other value-added services.

Having already made a name for itself in several key western Canadian markets, the company is currently positioning itself for further market expansion into eastern Canada, the U.S. and Japan, according to Gamini, who credits the company's strict adherence to the time-tested, authentic Persian-

style roasting and processing techniques for creating a unique taste profile for the California-grown almonds, hazelnuts, cashews, walnuts and whole pistachio nuts; raisins and mulberries imported from the Middle East region; and the all-Canadian lentils, chickpeas, red kidney beans, yellow split peas, cranberry beans and mung beans.

"Lentils are one of the largest Canadian exports around," says Gamini, "but along with many other beans and pulses, they are mostly exported out all over the world in bulk because, unfortunately, these great, highly nutritional foods are not as well-appreciated by Canadian families as they should be for some reason."

Group Effort

To address this alleged marketplace injustice, the company has worked with various industry groups such as the Winnipeg, Man.-headquartered **Pulse Canada**, a national industry association representing Canadian growers, processors and traders of pulse crops, "to better promote these bean and pulses superfoods to make them widely available in a more standardized packaging that will make it more appealing to Canadian families," according to Gamini.

"So far it's been working out very well," says Gamini, citing impressive early sales of the company's flagship brand packaged in attractive, vivid 454-gram and 907-gram stand-up pouches providing outstanding shelf appeal for *A Good Portion* products.

"From the outset, we just felt that the stand-up pouch format would present a far better visual shelf display compared to the traditional pillow-pouch packaging," Gamini asserts.



A Swifty Bagger SB-3600 machine from WeighPack Systems incorporates a user-friendly Allen-Bradley PanelView Plus 600 touchscreen interface to facilitate high-accuracy filling of flexible stand-up pouches at up to 45 pouches per minute.



Hamid Gamini,
General Manager,
**NaturaPack
Foods Inc.**

"Not only is our zipper pouch easily resealable, while giving the product a modern look," he explains, "the stand-up design aspect of the pouch saves shelf space for both the retail customers at their stores and for the consumer at home."





A close-up view of the 454-gram and 907-gram zippered stand-up pouches used for NaturaPack's A Good Portion brand of beans, pulses and nuts packaged and sealed on the Swifty Bagger SB-3600 machine manufactured by WeighPack Systems.

The pouches are filled utilizing a **Swifty Bagger SB-3600** manufactured by the well-respected Montreal-based machine-builder **WeighPack Systems Inc.**

By using the intermittent-motion *Swifty Bagger SB-3600*, Gamini believes that NaturaPack is the first Canadian company to package beans in stand-up pouches with automatic bagging machinery.

Gamini says NaturaPack carefully examined the market for bagging equipment and considered six different companies as potential suppliers, but ultimately went with WeighPack because the *SB-3600* offered more of an up-side than its competition.

"The *SB-3600* is a well-designed and well-built machine from a Canadian company," says Gamini, praising the fact that it contained components from well-respected European and U.S. manufacturers.

"It was important for us to have Canadian support, in case we required it. Despite WeighPack being headquartered in Montreal and us located in Richmond, we have access to local support."

Inhouse Design

Graphically-designed by NaturaPack itself, the attractive pre-made zippered pouches are manufactured overseas, Gamini relates.

To utilize these bags, WeighPack made a few adjustments to the *SB-3600*'s feeding stage to better enable it to grab hold of the NaturaPack bags, so that when the pouch is grasped by the *SB-3600*, it is quickly opened, upfilled and sealed before moving along a conveyor system supplied as a standard feature with the *Swifty Bagger*.

The *SB-3600* works with bag widths of 3.5 to eight inches, and lengths between six and 11 inches, according to WeighPack.

Although NaturaPack is only working with stand-up pouches, the *SB-3600* is also more than capable of handling gusset, pillow, and flat-bottom bags, with its high-performance features including:

- a **Rockwell Automation Allen-Bradley PLC** (programmable logic controller) and **PanelView Plus 600** color touchscreen interface;

- **Festo** cylinders and valves;
- a no-bag, no-fill sensor;
- an integrated exit conveyor.

Situated atop the *SB-3600* bagger, the **PrimoWeigher 360** 10-head, 1.5-liter bucket scale manufactured by **CombiScale** and amalgamated onto its bagging systems by WeighPack completes the bagging operation.

Smooth Operator

With a smooth mechanical design, the *PrimoWeigher 360* offers a tool-less individual distribution system of discharge chutes that avoids product spiralling.

"This is a wonderful machine that we purchased when we began our operations in 2011," explains Gamini. "It's pretty quick, too."

According to CombiScale, the *PrimoWeigher 360* has been designed for easy use by operators, technicians, managers and executives, which means all key personnel can quickly and safely learn how to operate it to its full potential.

As a food-safe machine, the open-frame combination scale and multihead weigher offers a sleek, less cluttered mechanical design that is easy to

clean, with no place for harmful bacteria to hide.

"A key perk of the *PrimoWeigher 360* is that it is easy to keep clean," suggests Gamini. "It has a stainless-steel open construction that helps decrease the amount of time spent cleaning by 50 per cent, compared to other models we saw."

Along with the increase in uptime, operators can also expect the robust machine to facilitate a reduction in service time by up to 80 per cent—adding up to significant savings in operating costs.

Gamini says he is also impressed with the quick installation of the equipment and its compact footprint, with the entire production line comprising 25 feet in length, 12 feet in width and 15 feet in height.

Another key piece of equipment on the NaturaPack bagging line is the *1210* model small-character inkjet printer manufactured by **Videojet Technologies Inc.**

Featuring an icon-driven operator interface, the operator-friendly *1210* is designed primarily for small-scale businesses that print between six to eight hours a day, five-days-a-week, offering

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6,000 hours of use before requiring preventative maintenance.

According to Videojet, the 1210 can print up to three lines of code at speeds of up to 533 feet per minute.

Able to store up to 100 jobs, the 1210 also offers IP55-rated washdown standard protection—a key factor in NaturaPack’s decision to purchase it.

“The pulses, beans and nut business is highly competitive in Canada, but there is still a very large untapped market for these kinds of food products,” Gamini reflects. “But we are very optimistic about our product.

“Not only do we insist on sourcing great-tasting product, but we are quite proud of the packaging we have created for the grocery store market,” he sums up.

“Although we are still a young company that has only just begun to establish ourselves in the industry, I am more than satisfied at the feedback we have received from customers—both locally and internationally. Given a bit more time, I think NaturaPack will become a real force in this market segment.” 🍁



An assortment of mixed nuts enter the multihead PrimoWeigher 360 CombiScale scale for accurate dispersion of product by weight, with all the pertinent production data and information displayed in real time on the operator-friendly, touchscreen control panel above.



A food-grade incline conveyor system transfers raw product to the top of the mezzanine level prior to being dumped into the 10-head PrimoWeigher 360 bucket scale below.

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