

# Dipping into the Future of Food Safety

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Family-owned Country Maid, maker of dips, spreads and salads, has always been devoted to food safety and quality, but its recently installed track-and-trace system puts the facility on the cutting edge of traceability.

In 1939 Irene Grebe opened Grebe's Bakery, selling home-baked goodies from her own kitchen in Milwaukee. Seventy years, one catering business and a state-of-the-art facility later, Grebe's has, among other things, spawned Country Maid, an international business selling dips, spreads, salads and more to markets across the United States and Mexico.

Through Country-Maid-brand products as well as private label goods sold in stores like Aldi and Piggly Wiggly, the family-owned business — now in its second generation — brings its simple family recipes to tables and picnic baskets around the continent.

### Catering to the Customer

In 1989 Country Maid relocated to its current 32,000 square-foot production facility in Milwaukee's Bay View neighborhood. In the subsequent twenty years, the company has grown to fill the space and has expanded its product line to include recipes beyond Grandma Grebe's staples, though Grandma's Potato Salad is still the company's bestselling product.

Selling its products around the country, under both the Country Maid and private labels, has presented some unique challenges and allowed for unique solutions.

"Well, I like the recipe for 'Grandma's'," says Bill Carr, President of Country Maid's Milwaukee facility, about his favorite potato salad "but tastes are different all over the country, so the recipe that goes out to New Jersey, say, is a little different than

## Dipping into the Future of Food Safety

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the one that stays in Wisconsin, and the one that goes to California is different still. You have to give people what they like.”

The ability to customize recipes may give Country Maid products broader appeal regionally, but working from several different recipes can complicate the manufacturing process. In order to overcome the challenges inherent to customization, Country Maid chose to implement a state-of-the-art track-and-trace system this past winter.

### Automating Track & Trace

The SG Systems Vantage software recently installed at the Milwaukee facility will help Country Maid manage all aspects of its operations. As production increased over the last several years and distributors pushed for more efficient track-and-trace capabilities, Joe Carr, the head of Country Maid’s shipping department began to research the options available to the company.

Says Joe, “We make 500 different salads and have to trace everything that goes into them. Then you have to incorporate sales, shipping and receiving, warehouse management — all that in one system. We considered three or four different companies before we found what we were looking for. As soon as I saw the system online, it hit me immediately, ‘this is what we need.’”



Automating the tracking process associated with individual batches from inventory to shipping, the software will help ensure that the proper products — prepared by the appropriate recipes — will reach their intended destinations. The inventory control mechanisms will also automatically shut down the processing line if batches come up short, allowing management to uncover the origin of any ingredient shortage.

## Dipping into the Future of Food Safety

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The system also allows the facility to pinpoint the specific ingredients used in each individual batch and stores this information, along with shipping numbers and destinations, in order to help automate the recall process. Chatter about upcoming legislation imposing stricter standards in combination with increasing pressure from retailers for expedited recall procedures convinced Bill Carr that now was the time to install the system.

He says, "We did this now because either this year or a few years down the road, it will be required." Carr continues, "We're getting too big — in our busy time, we ship 400,000 pounds per week. A mass recall at that level is just not realistic. This way, I can minimize the damage that's done if there's a recall — 'ten cases went here' instead of '400,000 pounds went everywhere.' This had to be done."

Automating the recall process will go a long way toward increasing food safety and security at Country Maid. This commitment to safety is one that is matched by the company's other efforts to keep food and employees safe.

### **A Commitment to Safety**

Even before implementing a traceability system this year, Country Maid has annually hired an independent auditing firm to inspect its facility and grade its compliance with various safety regulations. Using the data from these audits, Country Maid has been able to consistently improve its safety standards.

In addition, the facility makes use of various food-grade lubricants to ensure that materials that may come into contact with food products are safe. The facility also makes use of ready-to-use cleaning chemicals instead of concentrated cleaning solvents in order to prevent the kind of on-the-job accidents that can occur from the accidental spillage of highly concentrated caustic chemicals.

Country Maid is a visible member of its community — the facility has a small store that sells food items to those in the area and provides lunch for the company's employees. The company also hires local workers, many of whom have been with the company for over twenty years. Amanda Beerens, Director of Quality Assurance and Microbiology for Country Maid, heads up the facility's employee training initiatives and says that communicating proper safety standards to the employees is an important part of the safety curriculum.

"All of my training materials are in both English and Spanish. We respect the fact that there are a high percentage of Hispanic or Latin American employees who work for our company, and by hiring employees from that culture, it's our responsibility to accommodate them. There's no question. Beerens emphasizes that her top priority is food safety and stresses that Country Maid is devoted to fostering good communication between management and employees in order to facilitate the production of the safest food supply possible. She says, "Communication is the key to keeping the food safe, and food safety is paramount.

And the employee training required in conjunction with the implementation of the facility's newly installed track-and-trace system proved to be virtually painless.

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Though Country Maid set aside two weeks to get employees up-to-speed, Bill Carr says, "In most cases they are comfortable using the system after several days."

But Beerens' responsibilities go far beyond her plant-floor classroom. While Country Maid's raw ingredients are sent off to an off-site testing facility, Beerens' in-plant testing lab houses the equipment she uses to monitor the pH levels and water activity of each of the company's finished products. From each batch produced in the facility, a six-to-eight ounce sample is withheld for Beerens to monitor for contamination purposes.

### What the Future Holds

Though Country Maid's traceability system is now up and running, getting to this point wasn't all smooth sailing. In order to initiate production under the new system, lot numbers and ingredients had to be manually entered, one-by-one, into the system. This process took a bit longer than expected, and the company was forced to push back its "go-live" date by a couple of weeks. Once all the codes were entered and the system was up and running, Bill Carr concedes that there were "a few technical problems," but that SG Systems was quick to respond, sending on-site technicians to address the problems and implement customizations and modifications to meet Country Maid's requirements.



Though preparation for production takes a bit longer — the employees now have to input weight and ingredient information into the system before beginning production — Carr is happy with the new system and the way it streamlines any eventual recall process. And in the future, the system will run even more efficiently. Says Carr, "The second phase [of implementation] will have scanners to record the lot numbers and it will tie into our accounting system with real time updates."

As Country Maid prepares for its first busy season — April through August — with the first phase of its new track-and-trace system completed, the company is keeping its eye on the future in other ways as well.

In November of 2007, Country Maid hired Tom Sterle as its in-house chef. Tweaking

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existing recipes and creating new ones, Sterle hopes to introduce innovative recipes to appeal to consumers' ever-evolving palates.

"It's all about creativity," says Sterle, "and asking questions. Even to coworkers. 'Hey, do you like this flavor? What do you think?' If we don't like it, we don't make it."

In keeping with its commitment to meeting consumer demand — from tweaking its own recipes for regional markets, to developing new ones to meet changing appetites — Country Maid has begun to push toward all-natural ingredients and preservatives for use in its recipes.

As production ramps up for the summer, Country Maid is well-placed to handle new challenges that may come its way.

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