One (Little) Bite at a Time

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The company, now known as Colony Brands, Inc., is now one of the largest mail-order companies in the country, employing over 4,500 full-time and seasonal employees. Despite the massive growth, Colony Brands is still a family-owned company, with Kubly's son as Chairman of the Board. The company has kept its focus on direct-marketing, mail-order distribution, and though it is now testing a small retail line, outside of an outlet store a few blocks from the company's headquarters, Colony Brands is a strictly mail-order business. In 1926, Ray Kubly founded The Swiss Colony. The company began as a college project for Kubly, who bought, repackaged and sold cheeses through the mail. His cheeses were packaged in a garage and shipped in rail cars to customers across the country.

The company ships its products — which include everything from cheese to cured meats to furniture — worldwide and operates data and call centers to take orders. Most of the company's products ship from Monroe, Wis., but Colony Brands also owns warehouses in Madison, Wis.; DeWitt, Iowa; Clinton, Iowa; Peosta, IA and Reno, Nev.

Key to Colony Brands' success, the company runs its bakery operation out of its Monroe, Wis., headquarters, which has gone through several expansions, including ones in the 1960s and 1970s. During peak season the bakery employs 275 workers to produce a huge line of wildly popular baked goods. The line includes over 1,200 SKUs and features Colony Brand's petits fours; the company made and sold 43 million of the bite-sized treats in 2011.

The bakery has a lot to juggle, as nearly all 1,200 SKUs are baked in-house — not purchased from other vendors — and are hand-decorated. The special care taken to get the decoration just-so is evident in the final products. Aaron Blask, the project engineer and maintenance manager at Colony Brands says, "It's amazing to see the talent of the people working here."

Colony Brands views its products as part of a family tradition; the company strives to keep recipes consistent from year-to-year and to keep old favorites in stock for generations to come. Blask says that “operating as we are now means that generations are returning” and buying Colony Brands' products as a tradition. He says consumers come back looking to find “the same product that grandma had on her table.” Because of this product loyalty and repeat business, 75 percent of the company’s catalog offerings are part of its historical product line.

New innovations meet traditional products

Quest Industrial, LLC recently designed a custom water cutter utilizing robotics for cutting large layer cakes into smaller sizes, such as petit fours. The water cutter uses individualized AutoCAD designs to cut cakes in about 23 seconds. This cutting time is down from one and a half minutes using the company’s old system.This devotion to traditional baked products doesn’t mean that Colony Brands is stuck in the past, however. The company has recently invested in some custom and state-of-the art processing equipment in order to introduce more efficiency into its production line.

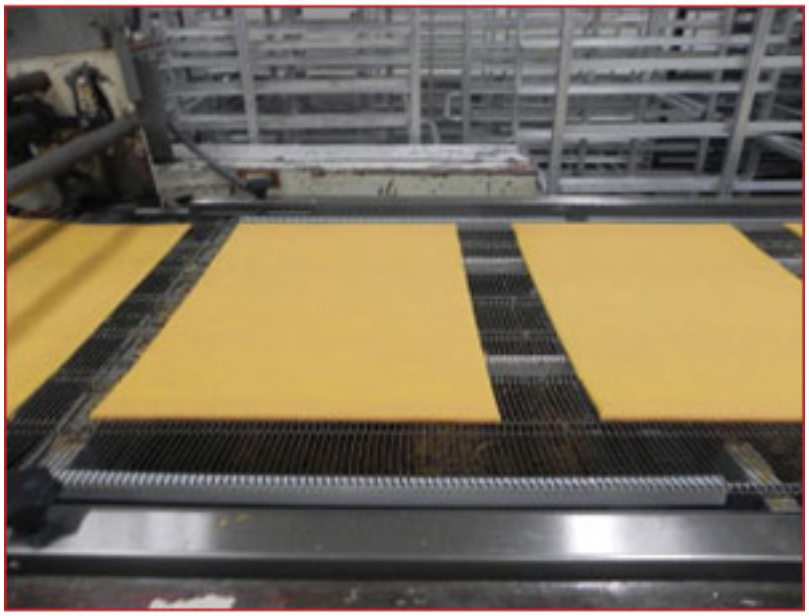
Blask says that Colony Brands chose Quest Industrial to design the system in part because its offices are only four blocks from Colony Brand headquarters but also the for the innovations and problem solving ideas they provide. He says that engineering and R&D are always looking for “a better solution,” and working with local and domestic suppliers whenever possible means that the company can more easily secure customer service and customized solutions.

Colony Brands has also recently invested in new metal detection systems from Advanced Detection Systems. Blask says that the systems are “really cutting edge with the size of products they can see.” Because Colony Brands sells directly to the consumer, the need for unadulterated quality and consistency is paramount, and the new detection systems have size detection capabilities that are much smaller than industry standard.

In choosing the new detection systems, Colony Brands presented challenges unique to processing the specialized kind of bakery items that feature heavily in the company’s catalog. Advanced Detection helped to create solutions for dense products like fruitcake and cheesecake, which can be difficult to “see” into. The company also designed a power supply to reduce noise and eliminate false rejects.

Colony Brands sees its equipment demands as part of its marketing plan. The research department is dedicated to developing recipes and patterns and discussing operating and maintenance challenges for potential new products. This team pores over recipe development and partners with quality assurance and marketing for and shelf-life testing. New and custom equipment is often ordered or designed to meet marketing goals targeted by this cross-functional team.

One in 43 million



The process begins in a mixer where batter is mixed and then extruded onto a conveyor. The batter is then conveyed through a band oven, which is adjustable for speed and temperature with a digital panel control.The company's famous petit fours are made with a clever mix of new technology and hands-on production.

After a very brief trip through the oven, the sheet of cake emerges completely baked, and a guillotine cuts the cake into large squares. The squares are conveyed through a cooling tunnel and then built into a layered cake.

The cake is built in the "bricking station," which features a large circular conveyor. The cake layers are conveyed through the station, and buttercream or jam is hand-spread across the top. During the second trip through, another layer of cake is placed on top, followed by a second layer of buttercream or jam. This process is repeated until the desired number of layers have been achieved, and then a final layer of cake tops off the product.

These large sheet cakes are then are weighed for accuracy before being sent to the water cutter, which cuts the big cake into many smaller cakes. The slices are robotically separated from one another and run through a chocolate enrober, which covers them top and bottom.

After being coated in chocolate or confectionery coating — which the Colony Brands tempers itself — each piece is hand-decorated and sent through a cooling tunnel to set chocolate.

At this stage, each product is run through a metal detector before being individually wrapped and packaged. Even Colony Brands' packaging equipment is specially designed for its purposes; the company has recently acquired a customized packaging machine to meet the growing demands of its production lines.

A safe step into the future

The company's ingredients buying department is rigorous in choosing suppliers, and each company must meet the strict parameters defined by GFSI before being contracted to provide ingredients to the company.In addition to implementing carefully designed HACCP plans, Colony Brands has also earned ISO and GSFI certifications in order to ensure product safety.

Colony Brands is not only interested in ensuring the safety of its customers, but it is keen to protect its employees as well. Blask says that not only does malfunctioning equipment inhibit product safety, but it also creates unsafe and undesirable working conditions for employees. "We want to make [employees'] jobs more fulfilling by providing equipment that works," he says.

And it seems to be working. Blask says the company employs several generations of families, all of who have worked at Colony Brands for many years. Bakery Production Manager Bill Hermanson, for example, has worked for the company for 40 years.

"The people make Swiss Colony what we are," says Blask.

For more information, please visit www.theswisscolony.net [1].

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