Cutting the Mustard

KRYSTAL GABERT, Editor, Food Manufacturing

Beaverton Foods, Inc. is currently the largest processor of specialty mustards in the country and operates out of a 70,000-square-foot food processing facility in Hillsboro, Ore., shipping about 30 million units per year. But its beginnings are much more humble.

The company can trace its roots to 1929 and to Rose Biggi, an Italian immigrant who moved to Beaverton, Ore., as a teenager and soon found herself working with a most unfamiliar crop: horseradish. Rose began grinding and bottling horseradish root in her farmhouse basement. She sold her product store-to-store and often bartered throughout the Great Depression.

As the economy improved, so did business, and the Biggis soon had a growing operation on their hands. Under the leadership of her son, Gene, the company began making specialty mustards. Up to that point, the specialty mustard market in the U.S. was primarily an import business. Beaverton Foods aimed to offer a smaller-quantity, local product that mimicked the quality and flavor of imports. In order to keep up with the market, Gene soon became what his son Domonic calls a “mustard connoisseur.”

Domonic Biggi is now the CEO of Beaverton Foods, the third generation of Biggis to head up the growing company. But while operations have certainly scaled up over the years, the company’s commitment to quality and to small batch processing has remained consistent.

From a mustard seed

After operating in Beaverton for over 70 years, Beaverton Foods relocated to its current Hillsboro facility 11 years ago and hasn't looked back.

The company now employs 72 workers at the Hillsboro processing facility, running two production shifts and one sanitation shift. Five staff mechanics oversee changeover, which is in high demand in a facility that produces as many products as Beaverton Foods.

"We refer to ourselves as a micro-batch processor, so it is more labor-intensive," says Domonic Biggi. With 700 product formulas and a proliferation of packaging options, the facility's three production lines must continually be modified to accommodate new product.

"All our lines are pretty flexible. We have so many different pieces of packaging, from glass to plastic, to squeeze and food service. Some lines are specialized for squeeze bottles, but they handle multiple squeeze bottles packages, so we're very, very flexible," says Biggi.

Biggi acknowledges that this method of production may not be the quickest, but it's what keeps the customers coming back. Co-packing currently makes up about 15 to 20 percent of Beaverton Foods' business, and the company's co-packing customers demand variety that can only be delivered in small batches.

"It's nice when you can run a formula all day every day," says Biggi. "It's very efficient. But we're not in that business. We're not in the widget business. Our business is specialty — small quantities, small batches. It's what co-packers like. They can have a variety of flavors. We're like an Indy car [team], we can change the tires and gas up and lube up and be out going again. That's how our lines are: quick changovers."

A new kind of mustard

But Beaverton Foods isn't quick with everything. Product development at the company is more distance runner than Indy car racer.

The company currently offers many kosher and gluten-free products and is looking to expand these lines — but not too quickly.

"It's hard to change a formula," says Biggi. "You've got to get your supplier to comply or go find it. It changes your labels. It can change the quality of your product and how it tastes, so we take our time doing it."

The company's R&D staff along with the Biggi family create a hybrid focus group for formulating new products, and not just to meet dietary requirements. The company is always on the lookout for food trends that may create a market opportunity for Beaverton Foods.

Product development is spurred by both internal and external forces. Sometimes a client will point out demand for a new product; sometimes food magazines and other sources will spark an idea with Domonic or Gene, and the development process will begin.

"There are a variety of ways to be creative. I guess if you're creative, you're always creative, looking for inspiration in different spots. It can come from anywhere — sometimes it's a restaurant, sometimes a supermarket."

In fact, the company recently launched a new wasabi product that comes in a container big enough to accommodate the addition of soy sauce. The product is designed for inclusion into sushi kits put together by grocery stores and food service companies but is labeled for individual sale to consumers as well.

The new packaging lists ingredients as well as gluten-free and kosher certifications. The company aims to offer customers an alternative to typical wasabi products, which, according to Biggi, are “chemically derived mustard powders coming out of China. They call it ‘Japanese horseradish,’ but there’s not even horseradish in it. We’re actually putting out an authentic wasabi product.” He continues, “We’re looking for people who want real product. There’s some consumer education to be done there, but it’s a nice niche to have. We’ll take that niche and grow it instead of trying to be cheaper and faker and not wasabi.”

While Biggi and the R&D crew focus on product development, the company employs two full-time quality control employees who make sure that the many products coming off production lines are safe. The company’s need to process multiple small batches each day creates a unique challenge for these employees, as quality control samples must be taken and stored from each batch processed.

“SQF drives our food safety program here,” says Biggi, noting that the company is audited by the FDA, in addition to third party auditors like Sysco and Costco. The company is also required to stay compliant with kosher and gluten-free guidelines with regard to products designated as such.

Putting a lid on it

Though Beaverton Foods packages a remarkable variety of product, the majority of it is bottled, and much of the production still involves horseradish. In fact, the company’s Inglehoffer brand cream-style horseradish is its most popular product.

The company receives and processes several million pounds of horseradish per year, all of which is sourced from a local, third-generation farmer.

Beaverton Foods employs a proprietary method of cleaning the horseradish before it is ground and sent to small batch blenders where it is combined with other ingredients like mustard seeds, which have been wet-milled into slurry and transferred to storage tanks prior to use.

Though Biggi says, “No two days are alike here,” most days see three filling lines running during the morning shift and three running during second shift.

Production schedules are made only a single day in advance. Even so, Biggi says, “Production changes at least once every day,” as Beaverton adapts its production to meet incoming customer demands.

After that, most orders are shipped within a day or two of production.

In the past 20 years, distribution has shifted toward a more robust self-distribution model. In the early 1980s, Biggi estimates that 95 percent of orders were filled through a variety of distribution companies. Over time, many of those distributors have consolidated, offering more limited service options, and Beaverton Foods has taken on a greater share of its own distribution. Biggi says roughly half of all orders are now filled directly. “As we get bigger and bigger, we can afford to cut out the

middle man and ship direct.”

It all comes back to quality

Biggi notes that he has a lot to live up to, standing in line behind his father and grandmother. He knows well the company’s unique history, which he calls the “family legend.”
“It’s not just about putting yellow mustard on a hot dog. It’s about putting authentic stone-ground [mustard] on a brat. Just take it up a notch,” he says.

And when Biggi reflects on the company’s mission and its future, he says, “It all comes back to quality.”

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