

AUGUST 2004

MEAT PROCESSING

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Rastelli Foods:

The Power of 'Ing



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The Power of 'Ing

Processing, sanitizing, specializing — the “Incredible No-Nonsense Guarantee” in operation at Rastelli Foods’ new plant. By Steve Bjerklie.

Using USDA’s HACCP-based regulations as a start rather than as a goal, Rastelli Foods in Swedesboro, N.J., has constructed what is arguably the finest portion-control processing operation in the United States today. The company, founded by Ray Rastelli 28 years ago in an empty donut shop in a suburban mall, uses the slogan “The Power of ‘Ing” to describe its promise to customers — the “incredible no-nonsense guarantee” — but, as a suffix, “ing” could just as well apply to the processing philosophy of the operation. This is a plant that’s all about sanitizing, perfecting, specializing, training, and customizing.

“Anyone can cut a steak,” says Rastelli, who should know; that’s how he got his start. “But designing and building and now operating a great plant, we can differentiate ourselves in the business. The plant allows us to fulfill a different kind of ‘ing’ for our customers: caring, delivering, and servicing.”

The gleaming new 50,000-square-foot operation, located on 12 acres in relatively open country south of Philadelphia, Pa., opened last December 1. It was a huge step up from Rastelli’s previous facility, a 9,000-square-foot operation housed in a former furniture store. And that was a big improvement over the old donut shop, when Ray’s only spot for the USDA’s inspector’s office was in a trailer out the back door. Moreover, the new plant will soon consolidate with

another operation to provide 100,000 square feet of processing space, half of which is dedicated to Rastelli’s growing export business.

With a focus on specialized portion-control processing, including steak-cutting and ground-beef-processing, for mid-Atlantic foodservice customers, the company has grown exponentially since its founding. In 1995, after steadily building up to an \$8 million annual business, the company’s management decided to focus strictly on meat processing. The crucial decision halved their business almost right away, but within two years Rastelli Foods moved into the furniture building. From that point, sales shot up stunningly: by 2003, Rastelli was a \$110 million company. By the end of ‘04 the firm expects to post gross annual sales of \$220 million, double the previous year’s total.

Yet unlike many exploding companies, Rastelli’s new processing facility exhibits careful thought and planning. “We spent two-and-a-half years drawing it up and then finally building it,” Ray, who is still company president, comments. “One of our greatest assets is the expectation our customers have of us being experts at what we’re doing. We wanted the new plant, which we happily show to customers, to show that expertise, to make our customers comfortable with their expectation that we really had our hands around this thing. We looked at the way we wanted to position ourselves in the market, which is to be able to guarantee to our customers that

they are going to get the very best product available from us. We thought about what that meant not just in the traditional definition of quality, which is about taste and texture, but about processing. We came to understand that making that no-nonsense guarantee included building the highest-quality plant our customers could buy from.”

Though Rastelli’s portions different species, including beef, pork, veal, lamb, and poultry (about 400 SKUs in all, 400,000 pounds per week), it was a sausage company in a distant part of the country that provided the inspiration for much of the sanitation ideas and design that went into the New Jersey operation. “We read what Bar-S Foods did in the wake of their *Listeria* recall a few years ago, how they ozonate all their water, for example, and built state-of-the-art laboratories and clean-room packaging areas. Bar-S said that after the recall, they want-



With new sanitation controls in the new plant, Rastelli Foods increased overall product shelf-life by 20 percent. (Photo courtesy the Prizm Group.)

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A new patty former folds rather than molds meat into shape. (Photo courtesy Prizm Group.)

ed to go way past what the USDA regs require and build something that was going to be the safest, best operation for years to come. We thought, Here's our chance to do the same thing.”

Indeed, like Bar-S's plants in Oklahoma, the Rastelli Foods operation outside Philadelphia also features ozonated water and sanitation mechanisms (see sidebar). The plant's flow-through design — raw materials enter the plant on one end; finished product exits from the other — facilitates filtered air movement. In fact, no spot in the plant is warmer than 35°F. (The flow-through design also facilitates just-in-time processing. The company can receive orders up to 1 p.m. for shipping by 7 p.m. the same day.) Rastelli's was also inspired by Bar-S's use of anti-*Listeria* controls in drains, and by the sausage processor's schemes for controlling employee movement in sensitive processing and packaging areas.

The plant has earned the endorsement of officials from USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service. In an interview, Dr. Kenneth Peterson, assistant administrator of FSIS's office of field operations, said the new Rastelli Foods facility was “a good example” of a company understanding how to design an operation that embraces the new era of HACCP regulation rather than the old command-and-control inspection model. (See “A New Approach in the Field,” this issue, page 44.)

Unsurprisingly in a plant positioned to be the best in its business, the Rastelli facility is outfitted with some of the finest processing machinery available, including: Dixie Union rollstock packaging machines from Reiser, a Multivac 290 packager, several other Multivac units (“we have more packagers than just about any plant our size”), Scanvaegt laser cutter, Handtmann stuffer, Food Logistics dicer, Trief slicer, Ross tenderizer, and a NuTEC 745 patty former.

The latter piece of equipment is a somewhat unique former. Rather than merely shape ground meat into discs through a mold-and-stamp mechanism, the NuTEC unit “folds” meat into shape. The result is a patty that holds more juice and is more tender than most; it's like a patty made from

juicy shredded, rather than dry ground, meat.

Technology like the NuTEC ideally serves a second purpose for Rastelli's in addition to fulfilling the company's promise of safety. Over time, through its developing expertise in processing specialized and customized products for foodservice customers, the company began to experiment with its own new-product development. Now it regularly comes up with new items — a “Mojo rib,” “European-style chicken,” and “Medallion of turkey wrapped in applewood-smoked bacon” are three recent new products from Rastelli — that customers can further modify to make into signature items.

“We try not to supply commodity items, to be honest,” comments Ray Rastelli. “Commodity products put you in the super-competitive pricing game, and unless you're a megaprocessor, that's a very difficult game to win. What we try to do is come up with product that will help our customers differentiate themselves from their competition. It's the customers that we always try to think about and work for. If their businesses are in good shape, if they're making money and have a future, then so do we.”

He adds: “Most of our new product ideas come from in-house, actually. Our employees come up with things — the Mojo rib was one of those. They eat at restaurants, and they know our restaurant customers, so they have a feel for what will work.” The new plant features a superlative test kitchen, where product demonstrations for customers are a weekly event.

Throughout the plant, workers for different species are differentiated by colored helmets — blue helmets cover the heads of the pork-processing employees, and yellow, logically enough, is for the poultry side. Employees from different areas are not allowed to mingle inside the plant.

In addition to the supplied equipment, Rastelli's designed its own drying room for beef, where product is stored at 37°F for 21-28 days under infra-red lighting. Bags of meat are opened and the juice drained into pans, not onto the floor.

Other plant features with a food-safety orientation include the brick flooring, which is able to withstand a temperature fluctuation of 160°F hot water and an ambient air temperature of 31°F. The floor drains are constantly rinsed with ozonated water, and all the in-plant hose bibs carry ozonated water as well. Finished-product packages are sprayed with ozonated water (as are packages at Bar-S Foods in Oklahoma).

All of the pumping equipment for the plant's technology, as well as motors and condensers, are kept in the plant's attic. “It's more expensive to do it that way,” says Ray Rastelli, “but it pays you dividends in the end.”

Indeed. Once the new plant got up to production speed, within a few days of the Dec. 1, 2003, move-in date, overall product shelf-life increased shelf-life by 20 percent, an improvement Rastelli largely attributes to the ozonated water. Another assist comes from the low temperature — 28°F — in the plant's distribution area. “The temperature is a challenge for our people, admittedly,” says Ray Rastelli. “That's cold. But they understand the need for it. Our people have a lot of pride in what they process and how we process it.”

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All employees at Rastelli receive profit-sharing distributions. The company also offers classes in both English and Spanish as a second language. (Photo courtesy Prizm Group.)

Okay, comments like that comprise cheap talk among industry executives. Everyone's employees wear their pride on their smock sleeves 24/7, to listen to some executives tell it. But in Rastelli's case, employee relations are very, very good, which is unsurprising at a company laser-focused on sanitation, safety, and processing with a difference. Employee turnover is "effectively zero," claims Ray. In fact, though the new plant is several miles from the old furniture-store facility, just about all of Rastelli's workers made the move, even

though commutes in some cases were lengthened significantly and had to accommodate Philadelphia traffic.

Five years ago Rastelli Foods began offering profit-sharing, even to hourly, with distributions made on December 1 so employees can make themselves generous at Christmas. "Frankly, I stole the idea from Hatfield Packing, when I heard they were doing profit-sharing," admits the company president. "But hey, if you're going to steal, steal from the best. And steal their best ideas."

About 35 percent of the operation's 125 employees are of Hispanic descent (in the Philadelphia area, that means quite a few Puerto Ricans and Cubans). ESL classes are offered; Rastelli is one of the too-few industry companies also offering Spanish as a Second Language to all employees. Employees can take cooking classes, too. The new operation's state-of-the-art employee welfare rooms contain 88 lockers each on the men's and women's sides.

However, perhaps the most dramatic, if common, demonstration of Rastelli Foods' commitment to sanitation and quality shows in, well, the plant's main bathroom. It's just across the hall from the beautiful, high-tech, equipped-with-the-best test kitchen, and if anything it's even more beautiful. In short: it's the loveliest bathroom in the entire U.S. meat industry, if not the world's. A gorgeous dark blue pedestal sink complements gleaming silver fixtures. And it's spotless, of course.

"They say houses sell according to the way their kitchens and bathrooms look," says Ray, "and we all understand why. Well, why wouldn't the same rules apply to a meat plant?" MP

The Ozone Layer

Learning lessons taught by the experience of Bar-S Foods in Oklahoma with regard to sanitizing with ozonated water, the Rastelli Foods plant is perhaps the most extensive ozonated-water installation in a meat plant in the eastern U.S.

The facility certainly comprises the largest installation in the industry for Industrial Controls, the plant's ozone-system supplier, says Al Mouracade, IC's president. "We worked with Ray Rastelli while the plant was still on the drawing board, advising him what he needed and where he needed to put it."

He's quick to point out: "Ozone in your water doesn't eliminate the need for sanitizing chemicals. Even though ozonated water can bring the bacteria count down to zero, it shouldn't be considered an elimination step. It's another control."

At the new Rastelli Foods plant in Swedesboro, N.J., which opened last December, Industry Controls installed ozonating systems for ozonated water in the plant's sanitation system, at the hose bibs, and in finished-product package rinses. IC also supplied hand sanitizers and hand dryers in the plant. After the operation got up to full production speed, overall product shelf-life increased about 20 percent, which Ray Rastelli attributes largely to the ozone.

Al Mouracade is happy to give ozone the credit, but he points out as well that "it's a real beauty of a plant — just the way it's designed, with the whole right side being all in-bound product, and the whole left side being out-bound. This is the way all meat plants should be."

Industrial Controls has installed an ozone system in the Plymouth Beef plant in the Bronx, N.Y., too, and is entertaining increasing interest in the technology from processors. "It's something new," says Mouracade. "If you're running your plant well, it can be a huge help." MP



Ozonated water sanitizes product packages at Rastelli Foods. (Photo courtesy the Prizm Group.)