

Kickapoo Valley Cheese Adds A Little Flair To Company's Conversion Packaging Line

Flair Introduces Several Packaging Products, Ensuring Growth In The Cheese Industry

Sherry, WI—Kickapoo Valley Cheese Corporation is a second-generation family-owned cheese conversion business.

Kickapoo Valley Cheese was founded in 1978 when Arnold Leytus purchased a small dairy from Bob and Ted Dickrell and converted the building into a cheese packaging facility.

Over the years, the plant has grown through improvements and additions to the buildings and equipment, building up to today's structure that features several production lines, on-site cooler, warehouse and administrative services.

Today, Arnold's son, Jim, owns the company, while Anthony Simboli is the chief operating officer.

"We take in bulk cheese block and convert it into slices, chunks, party trays, things of that nature," said Simboli.

Party trays are what the company is known for, according to Simboli.

"We put in a variety of different cheeses in one resealable party tray," he said. "We run printed film or clear film and labeling systems."

The party trays are available in a range of sizes.

"We package sliced, cubed and dice cheeses customized for the food service, and for retail," Simboli said.

The foodservice twin stack is a one-and-a-half pound package that includes 32 slices of cheese, all interleaved and ready to go, he said.

The package is ideally suited for restaurants, commissaries, and institutions. Today, the company's consumer, retail and foodservice clients can be found across the US and in five additional countries.

"We have quite a retail assortment with our party trays—we're in major retail chains in basically in every state," Simboli said.

Cheese for conversion is procured mostly from Wisconsin, some from outside, and a variety from overseas.

"We do pull some cheese from outside of Wisconsin, but not much," Simboli said. "We import about 30 different varieties from across the pond - Swiss from Switzerland, Holland Gouda, German Swiss, English Double Gloucester, things of that nature."

"We're actually pretty small," Simboli said. "We found our growth in doing the specialty retail packages and smaller foodservice runs that the larger companies find harder to do."

Kickapoo Upgrades Packaging Line With Flair

The company has automated and updated its lines over the past three years to keep up with trends.

"At least every line got some sort of upgrade," Simboli said.

Kickapoo Valley does slicing for foodservice, retail shingles, party trays, chunk cheeses and wedging from wheels.

We do about 1,000 wheels a month for a US company that imports 10-pound wheels directly from Europe, Simboli said.

Previously, Kickapoo Valley had just one film supplier to rely on, and "keeping all your eggs in one basket isn't a good idea," Simboli said.

The company saw some ads for Flair Flexible Packaging, met sales representative Bryan Jahner, and started some experimenting.

Flair is headquartered out of Appleton, WI, and based out of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

About 30 percent of all Kickapoo's film that runs through its

facility is from Flair, and "we're very happy with it," Simboli said.

Flair's films are used for cheeses ranging from Swiss to Monterey Jack and everything in between, Simboli continued.

We do vacuum packing on the Multivac with the Flair for all of our forming, he said. "It seems to do the best. We also use Flair films on our party tray line."

"I'd say about 75 percent run on that tray line is run with Flair," Simboli said.

Stocking Program

Andrew Tews has been sales manager at Flair since October. He said Flair's stocking program is second to none.

"From a service standpoint, our stocking program is highly diverse," Tews said. "We can turn orders around quickly, which allows our customers the ability to maintain smaller inventories, reducing operating costs."

Simboli said the company likes to keep enough Flair products on hand for about six weeks, otherwise they'll order in large quantities to get price reductions, he said. Flair holds Kickapoo's partial shipments at its Appleton warehouse.

Scanning the company's stocking program, you're able to see the many companies utilizing Flair packaging; there are many familiar labels consumers might see in their own homes.

"So far, the program and the service have been fantastic," Simboli said. "We haven't had any complaints. When we do have issues, Bryan's Johnny-on-the-Spot. The service has been great."

Flair is a relatively new packaging company, started in 1992.

"We're a much smaller player in the film business," Tews said. "But we're looking for niche pieces of business that perhaps the larger companies are ignoring. Don't spend much time on. We can work with the smaller independent companies."

Kickapoo Valley is the company that takes on the hard stuff, the smaller runs, the tougher cuts, the items the larger companies won't touch, Simboli said.

"That's where we found our niche," Simboli said. "We're doing well with it. Taking the small to medium sized orders."

Tews said that that type of order is perfect for Flair.

"If you are a cheese packager trying to do a smaller run, maybe a custom print, trying a different structure, that's our specialty, our game. We're very interested in gaining runs and batching things and doing things outside the box," Tews said.

New 40 Pound Block Pouch and Horizontal FormFill Seal Film

New to Flair's extensive line of packaging are 40-pound block pouches for both long and short hold.

"We do not offer a gusseted 40-pound bag for use in an auto-loading tower system," Tews said. "The block bags are for use in manual or tower

system applications."

The bags will be produced on Flair's new state-of-the-art nine-layer cast line.

"This is the newest extrusion technology," Tews said. This will provide Flair with superior gauge control, and the ability to split our structure into additional layers for improved strength and performance.

"Basically, it allows us the ability to break up the layers of nylon and really decrease oxygen and moisture transmission to give better shelf-life."

Also new to the Flair line is the company's horizontal form fill seal (HFFS) cheese film.

"The HFFS cheese film provides the cheese manufacturer or packager exceptional clarity, sealability and excellent machinability," Tews said.

Finally, Flair recently announced the addition of 4 mil high barrier pre-zipped vacuum pouches to its stock program.

"The 4 mil pre-zipped pouches provide more convenience, as well as an extended shelf-life for oxygen sensitive food products, including cheese," Tews said.

The pouches are made for a wide range of products that have stringent moisture or oxygen barrier requirements. This allows cheese manufacturers and packagers a truly value-added package, Tews said.

To handle these products, Flair, the largest importer in North America of films, recently opened a converting operation in Houston, TX.

Tews said the Houston facility will make Flair a leading converter of vacuum pouches.

The recent introductions have created efficiencies, ensuring continued growth in the cheese industry.

Flair is creating shelf appeal and retail appearance of packages with rotogravure printing.

"Packaging has come a long way in terms of how it pops off the shelf," Tews said. "We work with vacuum metalized structures that you see a lot in the meat industry."

Tews thinks no matter who you are, it's important to learn about packaging, about the extrusion process so you understand what goes into creating barrier protection, shelf life, convenience and sustainability.

"What we want to do is sit down with people and change the game a little bit," Tews said. "We want to look at different structures. Look at ways of improving oxygen transmission rates, moisture vapor barrier properties."

Tews said Flair is fortunate enough and fleet enough to separate the segment who are strictly looking at price.

"We're just not into that game. We have the ability to do more things than larger companies can," Tews said. The future looks very bright at Flair.

"We're going to be a very big player, not only in the vacuum pouch business but also in the shrink bags, our breadth of scope is going to get there." **FR**

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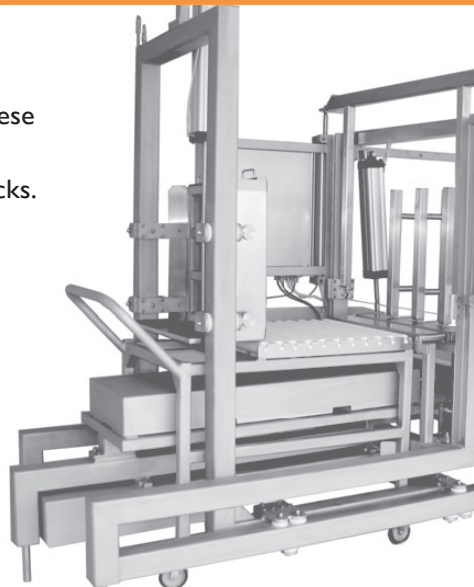
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