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President,  
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BY DAN PELTON, FEATURES EDITOR • PHOTOS BY GEOFF SCOTT

# PULLING YOUR WEIGHT

Fresh-cut produce packager relies on robust machinery and stringent quality assurance to grow thriving business

**B**oiled, broiled, scalloped, roasted, fried, mashed or whatever—it's hard to beat the humble old potato for its virtually limitless versatility as a tasty and nutritious side-dish for just about any entree out there, at least in the Western World.

And while the current low-carb dietary trends may have given this time-honored food staple a bit of a tarnished image in certain trendy circles, Mike Sangiorgio, president of the Toronto-based produce processor and packager **Vegfresh Inc.** says he is too busy filling customer orders to be losing any sleep over it.

Founded in 1991, Vegfresh has in fact reached the maximum production capacity at its current 25,000-square-foot Toronto plant, where about 50 employees annually ship close to 40 million pounds of freshly-cut produce to a broad range of clients in the food industry, who then use that produce as key ingredients in their own food products and recipes.

"We have outgrown the plant already and we plan on moving in the next two years," says Sangiorgio. "We are already at capacity here, and its pretty tight in all the areas of the plant."

"We need time to plan to move into a new facility, and to design and build it."

Describing Vegfresh as "an ingredients supplier," Sangiorgio says the company has managed to grow its business over the years by maintaining a strict focus on product quality and customer satisfaction, while allowing its food-industry clients to concentrate on their main areas of expertise—producing the finished product.

"We dice, slice and puree the product," he explains, "and we then send it to companies that take our product to make their own."

"We help them by providing the economies of scale," Sangiorgio adds.

"We run thousands of pounds of product per hour and for any small company, or even a mid-sized company, to invest in the machinery that can do that much production may not really be all that efficient."

"We are experts in what we do, and they are experts in what they do," he states.

Because of its high-volume throughput and production schedules, it was essential for Vegfresh to invest into the right capital equipment and machinery that would not only keep up with the brisk pace at the plant, without any excessive damage to the product, but would also be able to ensure precise and accurate utilization of all the raw products passing through its doors.

"We run anywhere from 800 to 1,500 22-pound bags of peeled potatoes each day," Sangiorgio told *Canadian Packaging* on a recent visit to the Vegfresh

operation. "You do the math. If we are off by a half a pound per bag, it will add up to quite a bit of product."

"So we were looking for a machine that was both fast and accurate."

Sangiorgio says the plant found the ultimate solution for its production needs with recent installation of the **Tiger Scales IW-25** integrated infeed conveyor and weigher assembly supplied by Montreal-based packaging machinery manufacturer **WeighPack Systems, Inc.**, which "has exceeded all our expectations."



The Tiger Scales IW-25 machine from WeighPack Systems plays a pivotal, central part in the packaging of peeled potatoes at Vegfresh, handling an average of 100 bags per hour.



Vegfresh president Mike Sangiorgio shows one of hundreds of 22-pound bags of freshly peeled potatoes shipped out daily out of the company's Toronto facility to clients in the food industry.

Outfitted with variable speed control and dual loadcells for even weight distribution, the IW-25 system—handling an average of 100 bags per hour at the Vegfresh plant—features double-cylindrical flap gates, a built-in conveyor, and modular construction, with anti-vibration leveling pads, that allow it to be expanded from one to four lanes, if production warrants it.

"The IW-25 was chosen because it is an integrated infeed conveyor and scale; it is one machine with two functions," says WeighPack district sales manager Sean Butler. "Because of that, it requires less floor-space, it is completely mobile, and is less expensive."

"Since the system operates as one, everything is controlled from one control panel, and is not subject to misalignment or maladjustments between two machines," Butler adds. "In the end, it's much simpler to use, operate and wash down."

One of the system's biggest attributes at the Vegfresh plant is the gentle way in which it handles the relatively fragile, peeled potatoes. This is essential, since any accidental cuts in the potatoes will allow the air penetrate the areas not treated by anti-oxidants—making the spuds discolored and unfit to sell.

To this end, the IW-25 at Vegfresh was programmed to ensure gentle handling throughout by directing the potatoes up the vertical conveyor just two spuds at a time, according to Butler.

"When selling to the food industry, we need to know what level of automation is required," Butler

elaborates. "Because we offer such a broad range of models of both scales and baggers, speed requirements are fundamental to choosing the best-valued machine to meet the objectives."

"We also must know if the customer needs a wash-down machine or not," he adds.

Vegfresh typically runs two full daily production shifts, six days per week: one from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; followed by a second shift from 4:30 p.m. until 1 a.m. The remaining time of each working day is spent washing the entire plant down, with Saturdays set

aside for mechanical maintenance on the machinery.

The religiously-observed washdown procedure is one of several proactive steps that have allowed Vegfresh to obtain multiple certifications for quality assurance, including the coveted **HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point)**, **ISO 9001** and **Kosher** certifications.

The plant employs several metal detectors supplied by the Toronto-based **Fortress Technology Inc.**, as well as a **Barco Pulsar** optical sorter, whose four built-in cameras scan every potato 50 times to detect any discoloration. Upon detection, the discolored potato is immediately knocked off the belt by one of the 250 air-jets located on the machine.

But for all that technology, Sangiorgio maintains that the human eye still remains an essential quality assurance (QA) tool at Vegfresh.

"The first QA checkpoint is at the receipt of the raw material," explains

Sangiorgio. "We determine whether or not it has come in at the right temperature, and whether the product is not only good-quality, but is adequate for what we need."

"Secondly, all our employees are trained on standard operating procedures for whatever product they are running. In other words, our people need to know what a good product is and what a bad one is, and there are many different variables they must take into consideration."

Such diligence is a necessary ritual at Vegfresh, which can often receive unexpected new orders streaming in for next-day or same-day delivery at a moment's notice, adds Sangiorgio, which is why the company operates a fleet of refrigerated trucks to handle such rush requests.

While processing potatoes remains the cornerstone of the company's business, today Vegfresh handles a broad range of fruits and vegetables used as ingredients: from basic staples such as celery, onion and peppers to the more exotic offerings like banana, butter-nut squash, zucchini, lemon, orange and mango.

In addition, the company has recently started producing a range of its own mixed pizza-ready toppings, which are customized blends of bell peppers, onions, mushrooms, and other healthy ingredients.

"The basic principle of our company has always been to manufacture products that our customers need, rather than to sell the products that we can manufacture," sums up Sangiorgio. "It's very important to cater to the different needs of each individual customer." □

For more information on:

**WeighPack Systems, Inc.**  
**Fortress Technology Inc.**

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