



PACKAGING FOR SHELF-LIFE

BY ANDREW JOSEPH, FEATURES EDITOR • PHOTOS BY JULIAN BEVERIDGE

on CUTTING EDGE

East Coast apple processor carves a bigger slice of the market with top-notch packaging systems

With an apple long said to be a good everyday habit for keeping oneself from falling under the weather, **Scotian Gold Cooperative** has used that age-old wisdom to maximum effect in the course of growing to become the foremost apple packing and storage company operating in Eastern Canada.

Located in the heart of the beautiful Annapolis Valley in Coldbrook, N.S., Scotian Gold uses its pristine, 38-acre site to provide numerous local apple growers with convenient, centralized facilities for the storage, packaging and marketing of their crops.

Since starting out as **The United Fruit Companies of Nova Scotia Limited** in 1912, Scotian Gold today processes locally-harvested apples from 55 growers based in the region—representing some 2,500 acres of highly fertile lands situated in the province's agricultural heartland.

"Scotian Gold Cooperative is a very diverse company," explains company production and development manager Alan Stewart. "Along with our fresh-fruit storage and packing facilities, Scotian Gold has a farm supply store, an apple retail market and garden center, and joint ownership of a fertilizer blending plant."

Fully-certified to the stringent *HACCP* (*Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points*) protocol for food safety, the fresh-fruit operation supplies its numerous retail customers with fresh whole fruits, Stewart explains, as well as with the fresh-cut apple slices that it also ships in vast quantities to foodservice clients.

According to Stewart, Scotian Gold handles approximately 40 per cent of the Nova Scotian apples used in the region's wholesale and pie-making market segments.

NEW SIGHTS

"The majority of Scotian Gold's apples are sold within the Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland, although we also export some McIntosh apples to markets in northern England," says Stewart.

"While the apple slices have so far been marketed only in Atlantic Canada, we feel confident that the new facility will soon enable us to reach Quebec and Ontario markets."

Stewart notes that the company's packed products are split in two major product categories: the three-, four-

and five-pound bags typically found in fresh-produce aisles at supermarkets; and those sold individually at the smaller retail outlets.

About two years ago, Scotian Gold decided to expand its product offering of fresh-cut apple slices by packaging them into 57- and 750-gram bags branded under the *Apple Snack Pack* label—marketing them to foodservice and retail operators as convenient snack-foods for children, with the cores and seeds completely removed from the product.

Built and started up last summer, the new state-of-the-art fresh-cut products facility has been a key factor behind initial market success of the *Apple Snack Pack* line, according to Stewart.

"This room has an HEPA-filtered air system, as well as all the required design and operating characteristics to ensure a high degree of food safety," Stewart explains.

"Within this facility, high-quality fresh apples are cut into wedges and dipped in a special ascorbic acid-based solution that prevents the slices from turning brown, while maintaining their original firmness."

After this treatment, the apple slices are fed onto the plant's *ADW-508MWH* scale system—manufactured by **Yamato Scale Co., Ltd.**—designed to feed and weigh the correct amount of apple



Scotian Gold production and development manager Alan Stewart shows off the company's new Apple Snack Pack product line, marketed as a healthy and nutritious snack option for young children.

slices, as specified by the operator. The slices then flow through a custom-made *ProStar* VFFS (vertical from/fill/seal) system supplied by Saukville, Wis.-based **Matrix Packaging Machinery, Inc.**, which packs the desired weight into pillow-shaped bags at 60 bags per minute.

Scotian Gold also worked with Jim Best, owner of **JG Packaging** in the fall of 2004 to customize its packaging line so that the slices would achieve maximum shelf-life possible.

LONGER LIFE

"Given that the apple slices are essentially 'living' items, we needed to obtain a special film to ensure that they would get the right amount of oxygen to support them, while facilitating the exit of carbon dioxide created during respiration," says Stewart.

With the help of Craig Rusert, president of the family-owned **CraigR Company Inc.** of Atlanta, Ga., Scotian Gold managed to find just the right modified-atmosphere packaging (MAP) film to do the trick.

Stewart says he's been very pleased with how the Matrix equipment has performed in helping create an attractive, functional package that has been very well-received by consumers, drawing many rave review in the marketplace.

"Our choice of package sizes fits both the single-serving and family-size needs," remarks Stewart.

"Moreover, the 57-gram bag's tear-notch and the 750-gram bags' zippers have also been well-received as convenient, easy-to-open, consumer-friendly, value-added packaging features."

Says Stewart: "The fresh-cut business is new and very exciting for us, as there is clearly strong demand in the marketplace.

"However, the dollars that need to be spent to gain access to this market are definitely not for the faint-of-heart," he points out.

"The shelf-life of a cut product is not nearly as long as that of its whole counterpart," Stewart concludes, "but we are determined to do what we must to be successful in the sliced-apple business." □



The Matrix ProStar VFFS bagger places the desired weight of sliced apples into pillow-shaped plastic bags made from special MAP film.

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