

BEYOND THE SEA

Richmond, B.C.'s Ocean Fisheries has brought its seafood business to a whole new level with the addition of convenience foods

BY CAROL NESHEVICH



Ocean's ready-to-eat Spanish Salad is just one of the company's innovative value-added products.

It's been said many times, but there's no denying it – these days, it's all about convenience. Busy people on the go want something they can eat quickly and easily, with little preparation required. But all too often, convenient means unhealthy. That's why several years ago, Richmond, B.C.-based Ocean Fisheries Ltd. decided to put a fresh spin on their seafood offerings. "We were looking for healthy, convenient products [to market]," says Scott Martin, director of Marketing for Ocean Fisheries.

The convenient part is often easy, according to Martin; it's the healthy part that can be tricky. So when Ocean Fisheries thought about the healthy image already associated with canned fish like tuna and salmon, they realized it would be a wise move to offer fish-based convenience foods.

Today, the company offers a variety of these products. There are the SnackKits, comprising crackers and ready-made spreads such as tuna, salmon, tuna antipasto and albacore tuna; and the Snack'N Lunch products, ready-to-serve tuna portions in small, easy-to-open cans that can be eaten on crackers or sandwiches. The latter product is available in eight flavours, including Light Tuna with Teriyaki Sauce, Light Tuna with Thai Chili, Wild Salmon with Sesame & Ginger, and Wild Salmon with Lemon & Dill. There is also a similar product line called Sandwich Mates, as well as a unique salad line. These ready-to-eat packaged salads include Spanish Salad, Sundried Tomato Salad, Italian Salad and Salad Niçoise (all featuring tuna), as well as a Thai



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Salad made with salmon.

All in all, this venture into the convenience market is going "super well" for Ocean's, says Martin enthusiastically. "It's become the fastest-growing segment of the canned fish market," he says, explaining that these types of products now make up 17 per cent of the Canadian canned tuna market and 10.5 per cent of Canada's total canned fish business as a whole. Martin offers several reasons for this growing popularity. "Canned fish used to just be a component of a meal – it was an ingredient, but it still required some work," he says. For instance, at the very least, making a traditional tuna sandwich means opening the can, draining the tuna, mixing in the mayonnaise and any other selected ingredients, and putting it on the bread. With a lot of these flavourful convenience products, however, all you have to do is open and eat. "It really answers that demand for convenient and healthy; it addresses that 'desk-top dining' issue," says Martin.

For Ocean's, the convenience products' customer base is

fairly diverse, including “dieters, athletes and mothers,” according to Martin, noting that busy parents especially love the products because they can pack them in their kids’ lunch and know they’re eating something healthy. “Canned fish has a very healthy image,” he adds. Martin says the product segment is also bringing in people who wouldn’t normally be fish consumers. For instance, there are a lot of busy professionals who may not normally have time to cook fish at home, but who would readily pick up one of Ocean’s snack packs or salads to eat on the go. These products are selling well at a variety of retailers, wholesalers and club stores across the country, with stores such as Costco selling a great deal of them. Martin says this is only the beginning for this type of offering, adding, “We’re still in the infancy of this category.”



But despite Ocean Fisheries’ great enthusiasm for its newer convenience lines, Martin is quick to point out that the company’s focus on its traditional business is in no way diminishing. “Our regular fish products, these are the longstanding, traditional staple items,” he says. “We will continue to put the same attention into those. The value-added piece will grow in percentage, but it won’t cannibalize the traditional items.”

Ocean’s traditional business has a wide reach, selling to Canadian and international customers in both retail and foodservice markets. On the international export side there is a full range of fresh, frozen and canned seafood available. Frozen salmon, fresh and frozen groundfish (including sole, cod and halibut), caviar (roe), and canned salmon are all regularly exported to countries like the U.S., the U.K., Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, France, Finland, Belgium and Korea. One of Ocean’s notable specialties in the export market is herring roe. In fact, Ocean’s was one of the early pioneers in developing processing methods and standards for salted herring roe (kazunoko), considered a delicacy in Japan, and since 1972 this product has been a major part of their export business.

Here in Canada, the traditional Ocean’s brand products continue to make a splash. The brand includes the conventional varieties of canned tuna and salmon, as well as canned baby clams, cocktail shrimp and crabmeat. Smoked oysters and frozen mussels are also available.

This privately owned Canadian company has a long history in the fish business. Incorporated in 1962, Ocean Fisheries actually built its business internationally before developing its domestic Ocean’s brand in 1984. Although the company’s first processing plants were located in Vancouver harbour, today Ocean Fisheries has two main plants: one in Richmond and one in Prince Rupert, B.C. The Richmond facility, on a 12-acre site on the main arm of the Fraser River,

is home to the company’s salmon cannery, herring processing and groundfish operation. There, it processes the seafood caught in the cold waters off the west coasts of B.C. and Alaska. The company can unload, size, can, label and ship from this one location, which helps to ensure that it meets its own high standards throughout the process. Ocean Fisheries also brine-freezes and processes roe herring for the Japanese market at the Richmond plant. In addition, this location is the home base for Ocean’s quality assurance team, which oversees production and processing in all company plants in Canada and partner plants abroad, consistently reinforcing its quality standards. Meanwhile, the Prince Rupert plant concentrates primarily on freezing and fish transfer. Situated on B.C.’s northwest coast, this facility processes the catch quickly and ships fresh and frozen salmon, groundfish, halibut and herring to Vancouver and markets around the globe.



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In terms of equipment, Ocean Fisheries operates a modern herring and wild salmon seine fleet of 30 company-owned, joint venture and private vessels. The company also works with more than 200 independent herring and wild salmon gillnet fishermen. Ocean’s operates a fleet of groundfish trawlers as well, ranging in length from 20 to 40 metres. Although Ocean’s admits these vessels might be considered small by international standards, they’re definitely modern and well equipped.

According to Martin, the company has approximately 100 full-time employees, and 200 to 300 seasonal workers, depending on the season. And interestingly, many of the company’s senior managers have a solid background in fishing. “This is a huge asset in how the company operates,” says Martin. It means upper management not only has a good first-hand knowledge of the business’s core operations, but they also have a profound respect for the environmental concerns. “We have long recognized that the long-term sustainability of our resources requires a strong ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management,” explains Murray Chatwin, vice-president of Ocean’s Fisheries Management division, in a quote published on the company website. “We are proud to have been a leader in developing British Columbia’s internationally respected commercial fisheries.”

When asked what makes Ocean Fisheries successful, Martin offers a few thoughts. For one thing, the fact that the company plays on an international field – in terms of both customers and suppliers – helps with innovation, as it can “glean ideas from this exposure,” he says. But otherwise, theirs is a pretty simple formula for success, according to Martin – a strong commitment to innovation, high-quality products and excellent service. “We strive for a high level of service,” he says. “We’re always working to exceed expectations.” FC

The Art of the trade

Getting the most out of trade missions requires diplomacy, flexibility and a willingness to learn

BY HÉLÈNA KATZ



IT looked like a hot lead generated on a trade mission. At a meeting a few months later, the potential client offered ideas on how the two companies could work together. Then another meeting followed. “I thought ‘Hallelujah, this is going to be great,’” recalls Lorne Goodman, general manager of the Saint John, N.B.-based Crosby Molasses Company Ltd. “I got back [to the office] and they wouldn’t answer their phones. They were wanting to be social and had no interest [in doing business together].”

What businesspeople like Goodman eventually figure out is that trade missions can be like dating for the business set. You try to figure out whom you want to meet and how to capture their interest. Once you’ve met, you follow up if you think there are possibilities for a relationship. Eventually, the players involved decide whether or not to clinch the deal and do business together. Sometimes the interest between the two players is clear, but occasionally cultural differences lead to mixed signals and misunderstandings.

“At the end of the day, developing business is pretty simple, but you need to understand the person you’re doing business with,” says Charlottetown, P.E.I.-based Ann Worth, an export consultant and former executive director of the Atlantic Canada Food Export Partnership. “The problem is that without knowing the cultural nuances of a market, you

can offend a client, or not understand why things are not moving at the pace it would in North America.”

Trade missions typically bring together six to 12 different companies, giving participants an opportunity to familiarize themselves with a potential market and its culture, assess trade opportunities, conduct competitive analysis and make key contacts. “We know there are opportunities out there, but it’s hard to find them from sitting in an office in Saint John, New Brunswick,” says Goodman, who has participated in trade missions to Europe, New York, Miami and the Caribbean.

Worth explains that in each trade mission there is a mission leader to handle the co-ordination and logistics involved, taking some of the stress off participants. “Those things can be daunting in a strange environment, especially when it’s your first time,” she says. “When you have someone looking after that, you can focus on the business at hand and not be sidetracked with details like what’s the distance between point A and point B.” Activities vary on trade missions, but often they include a group orientation to the market, individual meetings with key potential customers, a business lunch or breakfast with government trade officials, and industry-specific tours to stores, ports or distribution points to educate Canadian companies about how the supply