



# DASHBOARD DINING

By Sandra Eagle  
with files from Hélène Katz.

It's a daily ritual for countless households across the country, slapping a sandwich together for lunch. How about the prospect of making 40,000 a day? Hygaard Fine Foods Ltd. started out as a one-man operation making sandwiches for the bar and convenience store trade is now churning out 40,000 sandwiches, 20,000 burgers and about 4,000 hand-wrapped fresh sandwich offerings a day. Annual revenues are \$13 million. Hygaard was purchased by Premium Brands Inc. of Richmond, B.C., last August.

The 40,000 sq.-ft., federally inspected Hygaard plant is located in Sherwood Park, just outside of Edmonton, is HACCP approved and produces about 40 SKUs. It's run by a staff of 80 that runs on a five day split shift, which in the summer months moves to a six day schedule.

About eight years ago, Hygaard upgraded to a combination Grote automated slicing line and an AFT sandwich assembly unit that allowed for more volume in a single line. Kim Heeks, director of manufacturing, sourced the equip-

ment in Britain, which is distributed in Canada by Pemberton & Associates Inc. "We do batch runs that are based on economies of efficiency, and because of the long shelf life we're able to attain because of modified atmosphere packaging (MAP) we are more efficient on the line."

Hygaard products that are MAP packaged have a shelf life of 44 days. John Leslie, vice-president of sales and marketing for Hygaard, says the logistics of moving product, particularly in Western Canada dictates a longer shelf life. "Your reach is determined by your shelf life," he says. Since Hygaard moves product into the Arctic and all across Canada, reaching into Newfoundland and Labrador, a long shelf life is a necessity. Hygaard's submarine sandwiches, wedge sandwiches and burgers are all MAP.

But on the fresh side, an eight day shelf life is the top end of what is achievable. By fresh, Heeks means a sandwich that is handmade, as opposed to machine made, with rolled meats, a high end lettuce with vegetables and specialty bread

like panini, focaccia, pita breads or wraps. While not a substantial part of Hygaard's business, it is an incremental item that appeals to a convenience store customer who wants to eat right away.

When the low-carb craze hit, Heeks was surprised to find that the impact

on the business was not as large as he thought it might be. "Obviously healthy choices are important to our customers and we are looking at lowering calories and fat." Heeks adds, "We will be looking at incorporating 12 grain bread into more of our product choices."

The entrance of McDonalds into

the fresh sandwich market doesn't seem to faze Leslie, and in fact he's looking forward to the exposure and visibility that its ad campaign will bring to the entire sector. In fact the North American sandwich business is growing, especially in the foodservice sector.

The sandwich market is big business in England and growing at a rate of eight per cent a year. Collectively, the British eat about 12 million sandwiches a year, while the average American consumes 193 sandwiches a year. The industry is in its infancy here, says Bill Froggatt, vice-president of capital equipment at Pemberton.

With an increasingly fast-paced, nonstop society, dashboard dining is a growing trend. "We're in a 24-hour society now," says Froggatt. "If you have an appointment in one part of town and another appointment in another part, you're probably going to grab a sandwich," he points out. People will pick up a sandwich for breakfast, lunch or dinner.

That is fuelling a need for more sophisticated fillings. "You want a sandwich that has some life to it," says Froggatt. Now more imaginative sandwich fillings in Madagascar sauce are showing up on grocery and convenience store shelves. There also seems to be a resurgence of grilled sandwiches such as paninis.

"Sandwiches have been around forever. They used to be ham, cheese and soggy lettuce," he says. "Those days are gone."

Shifting production from hand-made sandwiches to automated is a big investment and doesn't lend itself to short runs. Since the sandwich industry is in its infancy in Canada, this means having the customers to justify automation. Automation means manufacturers need to plan runs and production with a bit more intensity and have the sales to make it worthwhile. "You don't want to deal with 10 sandwiches to Joe's coffee shop," Froggatt says. "You want to deal with the WestJets and the Wal-Marts."

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