



# MEET THE BOEKESTEINS

A Dutch family from Dundas, Ont., is making HACCP headlines with newly certified facility • BY GAIL POWELL

*In 1976 when the Boekesteins bought a small meat processing facility in a small town north of Hamilton, Ont., they never counted on making the local news.*

Today the food industry spotlight shines on Country Meat Packing after it became one of only five plants in Ontario to get HACCP-Advantage Certified – a recent program offered by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) for non-federally registered small-to-medium size food processors. In June, over 200

community members, including local leaders, customers, suppliers and the media, attended the company's HACCP-Advantage certification ceremony and the unveiling of its latest plant expansion.

All this recent media attention seems to be working. Since the company's \$1.5 million investment to become HACCP-Advantage certified, "sales to Sobeys have increased by 50 per cent," notes Albert Boekestein, Country Meat Packing's president. "The biggest benefit of getting certified is that it shows our customers that we're a company that produces safe products," he adds.

With 250 wholesale clients – and over 85 different products – their Dutch-style deli meats, including Black Forest Ham, salami and smoked sausage, can now be found in every Dutch deli across Ontario, in all eight Bruno's Fine Foods and in several major Ontario grocery retailers.

Albert and his two sisters, Carolyn and Wendy, their parents Ben and Jane, along with eight full-time employees run the plant's day-to-day operations.

"Going from a 1,200 sq. ft. plant in 1976 and slowly adding on to our now 24,000 sq. ft. plant was the key factor in getting HACCP ready," explains Albert. "The reason for the latest 9,000 sq. ft. addition was to create a product flow so that fresh meat comes in and flows through the plant with no chance of cross-contamination. Everything is then packaged in a separate room and shipped out the front door."

The biggest challenge the family has faced so far in preparing their plant for certification has been "government red tape," says Albert. "We're dealing with so many different government departments...waiting for permits...it seems that you have to constantly keep on them. It took us 10 months before we got our permits to begin building."

And it took almost two years to become HACCP-Advantage certified. It could have happened in less than one year but "we wanted to do things right," says Albert. "We worked closely with Sandra Fulton from Fulton Food Safety Consultants and she gave us the incentive to go for it. We thought if we were going to make such a large investment and add on to our plant then we better get some guidance



Product entering the hopper of the new Handtmann stuffing machine.

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requirements. Albert purchased a new stuffing machine from Handtmann, a refurbished mixer and had digital temperature controls installed in each room by Scott Processing Equipment of Mississauga, Ont. New refrigeration units were also installed in order to maintain regulated temperatures and to enhance cooling cycles for cooked meat products as well.

"All plant employees were trained on food safety awareness, specific job activities, critical control monitoring, deviation procedures and verification procedures, as well as allergen awareness, control and correct limits under the *Food and Drug Act*," explains Fulton. In addition, she says, Albert and Carolyn took off-site training on food safety – a training program that OMAFRA and the Ontario Independent Meat Processors both endorse.

The Boekesteins would really like to see the provincial government and the federal government come together and

and do it properly," he adds. "We knew what we wanted and designed the building with their help."

Country Meat Packing is the third Ontario plant that Rockwood, Ont.-based Fulton Food Safety Consultants has assisted in becoming certified. "Our work was to write against or respond to the HACCP-Advantage food safety standards, develop the HACCP manufacturing plans and to train the plant personnel on the system," says Sandra Fulton, president.

"Typically the certification process does not take very long to complete," she adds. "Most of the time is spent on getting each plant to that point. Each of the three facilities we have worked with have very different operations. On average it generally takes about six months to a year. Some companies have no written programs or records and all documents have to be created, new personnel must be hired during the HACCP development and implementation phase and some plants have to make structural modifications to the building in order to address some of the standards related to food safety."

Along with the company's physical plant expansion, new equipment and containers with surfaces that are easy to clean and sanitize have been brought in to meet HACCP

review their individual policies on HACCP to create one HACCP standard. "We're very stringent and equal in standards to any federal plant," he says. "I don't sit at my desk overlooking production through a video camera. As a family, we all take the time to see what products are coming out of our smokehouses and going into the packages. We are the ones that are taking the initiative to go HACCP and to put these food safety measures into our plants...it's clear to me that we're as well maintained as any federal plant – yet we are not allowed to ship out of province," he notes. "I don't want to ship out of country, but at least let me ship out of province."

The next phase of the Boekestein family's plant upgrade involves working closely with the Ministry of the Environment on a 400,000 gallon wastewater holding tank. This two acre tank will be located on the 60 acres of property owned by the company. Albert is making no predictions as to when this next phase will be completed. "They've just started digging and who knows what roadblocks we will find as we get deeper into this part of the project," he says.

The family is taking all these changes one step at a time. "Growing fast can sometimes hurt a business. This is our

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family business...we pride ourselves on growing slowly and paying attention to the needs of all our customers. We still remember that it's our smaller customers that have got us to the level we are at today."

It's Albert's hope that one day the third generation will continue to keep this family business operating. "My son really wants to work with us. He always asks me, 'Do I have to work tomorrow?' I will never force my kids to have to work here," he says. "The kids sometimes think we are 'too strict' with them. But I tell them we have to be strict and follow the rules. And that's why we are still around today. Now we are not just a family-run business, we are a HACCP-certified family-run business."

*Gail Powell is a Georgetown, Ont.-based freelance writer.*

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