



ALL IN THE FAMILY

Sprague Foods' evolution from seasonal canner to successful year-round producer spans four generations and a mighty large hill of beans

BY CAROL NESHEVICH

You could say canned food is in Rick Sprague's genes. Way back in 1925, his great grandfather, J. Grant Sprague, started the J.G. Sprague & Sons Canning Co. At the time it was just one of many small canning operations in Prince Edward County, Ont. "It was a good place for it, with access to water for shipping, so there were dozens of seasonally based canning operations in Prince Edward County at the time," explains Rick Sprague, vice-president of the company, now known as Sprague Foods Ltd.

The company, now based in Belleville, Ont., at first processed only tomatoes and pumpkins, gradually adding production lines to include tomato juice, tomato purée, corn and raspberries. Rick Sprague's grandfather, Jay Sprague, soon took over the business and ran it as a small, seasonal canning company until his death in 1967, when his son Roger Sprague took over.

It was then that the company really began to take a new

direction. "My father decided that continuing with a seasonal operation might not be viable," says Sprague. "So he forged new business relationships with emerging ethnic food companies in Toronto, like Unico, and started canning a variety of beans in the off season." While products like fava beans, kidney beans and lima beans may not sound "ethnic" to us today, in the 1960s they were still considered exotic in North American markets. "At that time [those products were] geared toward the ethnic market, but that soon changed," says Sprague, noting that demand for these beans began to grow outside of the ethnic communities during the 1970s and '80s. "By the 1980s, bean products were growing at an exponential rate."

At the same time, more tomato products were hitting the market. With competition growing in both the tomato and bean markets, the Spragues began considering the introduction of new products, including soups, which Sprague says

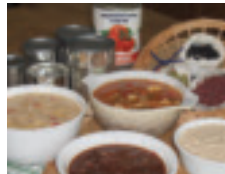
were “mainly bean-based ethnic soups.” During this early period of product diversification, Rick, then at the University of Guelph studying food science, was able to bring his passion for food research to the company to develop new product lines.

When construction began on a new production facility in Belleville in 1993, the Spragues decided to also update their processing and sterilizing equipment. It was something they had considered for some time, with the goal of making the company more adaptable to the rapidly changing requirements of the food business and packaging technology. As Sprague explains, ever since the Second World War and the advent of frozen foods, “people have been predicting the end of the can.” While cans clearly haven’t disappeared from grocery store shelves yet, the company wanted to be prepared for anything, so it invested in advanced European processing/sterilization equipment that works with various types of packaging. Today this system is one of Sprague Foods’ crowning glories. The company’s website boasts of its benefits: “Our thermal processing system, the first of its kind in North America, uses high temperatures and short cook times to optimize the nutritional and physical quality of our products.” The Canadian Food Inspection Agency and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration also both “recognize Sprague Foods Limited as having one of the most advanced processing facilities for low-acid canned foods in North America,” according to the Sprague Foods website.

As Sprague explains, “With other systems, you often have to overcook to sterilize...but this system optimizes the cooking.” Carrots, for example, “come out looking like they were made at home,” says Sprague. The system also eliminates the need

for additives, a real attribute in the eyes of an increasing number of health-conscious consumers. In fact, the company has become known for its healthy options. With a primary focus on beans, soups and sauces, many of Sprague Foods’ products are ideal for fulfilling the “big three,” as Sprague calls them – low fat, low sodium and high fibre. “Many of our products are higher end, but extremely healthy,” says Sprague, who adds that because of this strong focus on health, “the challenge is to develop products that taste good too.”

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gin, ready-to-eat food market, concentrating on a range of bean soups, rice puddings, and beans and pastas in sauces. It produces mostly retail products, as well as some institutional business. About 50 per cent of its business is in Canada, with the remainder in the U.S. The company also develops many private label products. While Sprague admits the company has developed some President’s Choice Blue Menu items, he’s reluctant to divulge the names of other companies for which Sprague Foods develops private label items, out of loyalty to those customers. “They would rather we fly under the radar,” he explains. He does say that two of Sprague Foods’ best-selling products are private-label minestrone and lentil soups. There’s also a marinated bean salad and a refried bean product that sell extremely well, says Sprague.

Currently employing about 50 employees and bringing in annual sales of about \$18 million, Sprague is optimistic about the future of his company. “The categories we’re already in, we’re wanting to push further,” he says, “and ready-to-eat and vegetarian are areas where we’d like to expand.” Sprague is also investing in more processing equipment in order to grow the business – a business, he says, that has “very much a family atmosphere.” And it should, considering it’s been 100-per-cent family owned for four generations. “The family is very involved in all aspects of the business,” says Sprague.

Lyle Vanclief, former federal minister of Agriculture, has known the Sprague family for decades. He believes one of the company’s strengths is its “hands-on” nature. “There’s a very close relationship between the family members and the business,” he says. Another strength, adds Vanclief, is the Spragues’ ability to “monitor what



Sprague’s new state-of-the-art cooking and sterilizing system



The original Sprague factory, built in 1925



The company’s new Belleville, Ont. facility

the consumer is looking for, and then see if they can provide that in a nutritious, healthy way.”

Ultimately, Vanclief believes the key to Sprague Foods’ longevity has been its owners’ ongoing entrepreneurial spirit, as well as the fact that, through the generations, the Spragues haven’t been afraid to modify their business model to adapt to the changing needs of the marketplace. They also haven’t been content to rest on their laurels. “They’ve changed with the times; they’ve evolved,” says Vanclief. “They’ve kept themselves up to date, and they haven’t stagnated.” ^{FC}

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