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PLANT TOUR Westward ho!

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West Liberty Foods' first facility outside of Iowa takes slicing to a whole new length: 10-ft. logs

By Alicia Karapetian, managing editor

In 2006, the small and sleepy town of Tremonton, Utah, got a wake up call: The population was about to jump. West Liberty Foods was coming to town after a long site search for its new 217,000 sq.-ft., 1.6 million pounds-per-week further processing facility.

The West Liberty, Iowa-based company had come up against a welcome, but nevertheless difficult, challenge: Its three-year-old Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, slicing facility had nearly reached capacity, but demand was still increasing. Executives knew it was time to expand as they raced to keep blue chip customers such as Subway restaurants and Wal-Mart Stores stocked with product.

Moving west seemed a natural way to widen the company's distribution reach and find adequate space to process sliced turkey, chicken and red meat, as well as individually quick frozen products - from the chicken strips found in a Subway Chicken Teriyaki sandwich to meatballs stocked in the Costco freezer.

Not only did the new plant in Tremonton, an Idaho border town about 75 miles north of Salt Lake City, open the entire West Coast region of Subway restaurants for West Liberty products, but building from the ground up allowed West Liberty to break out of 6-ft. slicing logs and into a whole new arena: 10-ft. logs.

West Liberty, which supplies a very large percentage of all deli turkey in Subway restaurants, saw it as a strategic step. "We've leaped to a different type of process," says Plant Manager Dave Frett. Because there is a round on the end of each deli log, having a log end every 10 feet instead of six means West Liberty is losing less yield.

Slicing up the competition

While the facility started processing IQF items in August, it just began slicing operations in mid-October and currently receives raw protein throughout the week from its Iowa facilities. Ten-thousand-pound batches of product, such as Subway turkey, are processed at one time. According to Frett, the log fabrication process is "just like that at any other slicing facility up until the point of sizing."

West Liberty had to work closely with equipment suppliers to provide a wide variety of equipment specially designed for the 10-ft. logs. Sizers, for example, had to be fitted with a custom-designed conveyor belt to handle the length of the larger, 100-lb. logs.

Once a log is stuffed and sized, it is moved to a smoking-ready rack. But that's heavy business, which is why the plant employs a powerful robot. Pallet jacks pick up the slack when moving the racks to the smokers, which usher the product automatically through the cooking process until they are released on the other side, where a pallet jack again takes each rack, which can weigh up to several tons.

On the offense

Logs are chilled and then moved to West Liberty's clean-room environments, or what the company calls the "hot zone," where a casing sanitation step and a post-lethality frying treatment are applied before slicing.

Once fried, the logs are moved to an individual slicing cell - independent rooms with one slice line per cell. Though the company is only currently operating five of its 10 available cells at Tremonton, Frett says there is space to expand to 20 cells, the same amount in use at the Mt. Pleasant facility.

Other food-safety defenses borrowed from Mt. Pleasant include dedicated roof-mounted refrigeration units and cell drains, and positive air pressure, which is cooled to 38 degrees F and filtered to clean-room standards. Also, drainage systems for each cell do not connect until they are 30 feet away from the plant to keep each one autonomous, which reduces cross-contamination risks.

And Frett says that the processes worked so well at Mt. Pleasant that few changes were needed at Tremonton. One big difference, however, was each slicing cell had to be built several feet longer to accommodate the larger slicer and 10-ft. logs.

Once a product is sliced and packaged, it moves along a conveyor to Millard Refrigeration Services, which operates a cold-storage warehouse in between the slicing and log fabrication/IQF sides of the West Liberty facility. West Liberty previously partnered with Millard Refrigeration Services at its Mt. Pleasant plant, and Millard also moved to Tremonton.

Movin' on out

West Liberty, which was founded by 47 turkey growers in 1996, has rapidly expanded in its short 11-year existence, but the Tremonton addition to its portfolio was its first out-of-state experience. The company tapped Frett, an Iowa native and former head of operations accounting at the Mt. Pleasant slicing facility, to manage Tremonton.

Company President & CEO Ed Garrett said at the facility's opening that while the company originally thought Tremonton was "too far from Salt Lake City," a gut feeling and warm reception from officials in northern Utah changed all that. State tax-rebate incentives totaling \$2 million, and an 80 percent property tax break from the city helped seal the deal.

According to Frett, most Tremonton residents were commuting to Salt Lake City or other towns to work, but with West Liberty's arrival, residents were instead apt to apply for jobs at the processor. In fact, Frett says the plant received more than 1,000 applications to fill about 200 initial positions. The workforce will eventually expand to 500 employees.

West Liberty's move to Tremonton has not only provided a boost to northern Utah's economy but also is helping fuel previously un-thought-of internal growth and innovation. "Eleven years ago," says Chairman, Paul Hill, "this wasn't even a thought, let alone a dream."

Flexible expansion

For West Liberty Foods, moving west wasn't just about expanding its slicing capabilities.

"The ready-to-eat chicken line will provide us the opportunity to introduce and service new product lines to our current customers," says Ed Garrett, president and CEO, who also was honored with the Subway restaurants Leadership Award in 2007.

West Liberty slaughters only turkey, so it buys other proteins on the open market, such as chicken from Pilgrim's Pride, which is trucked to Utah from Pilgrim's facilities in Alabama and Texas.

Plant Manager Dave Frett says about 30 to 40 percent of the products produced at Tremonton are IQF items. The 93,00-sq. ft. IQF processing, fabrication and cooking area has flexible lines to allow the company to move from processing items such as fillets one day to patties the next.

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