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CASHING IN THE CHIPS

Pita chips producer puts food safety first by partnering with third-party X-Ray inspection and rework service provider
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CEDAR VALLEY



FROM LEFT: AMEEN FADEL, PRESIDENT, SURRIA FADEL, CO-FOUNDER, CEDAR VALLEY SELECTIONS



Cedar Valley Selections co-founder and president Ameen Fadel founded the company as part of his high-school project back in 2017, using his family's authentic Middle Eastern cuisine recipes to create a fast-growing brand of all-natural fried pita chips now retailing across Canada.

CASHING IN THE CHIPS

Third-party X-Ray inspection and rework service helps fledgling pita chips producer save its precious cargo from the garbage heap

By George Guidoni, Editor
Photos by Ahmad Sayed

In these days of runaway food inflation and high anxiety about food security, throwing away pallet loads of packaged food items on a mere suspicion of foreign material contamination is definitely in bad taste, if not morally reprehensible.

And yet, it happens more often than the food industry would like the public to know, with food producers often taking the better-safe-than-sorry route of sending the suspect foreign material contaminated products to landfill rather than trying to pinpoint the source of contamination on the account of it being too difficult, too time-consuming, or otherwise too inconvenient.

While this is to some extent under-

standable, since sending unsafe food into the market can lead to disastrous consequences—from costly product recalls to heavy fines and serious damage to a brand's reputation—the fact remains that two wrongs hardly make a right.

While avoiding accidental food contamination is naturally the best safeguard for not having to face such a difficult choice, there are many ways that tiny contaminants and debris can make their way into the finished packages during high-speed packaging line operations typically involving a lot of moving machinery and metal components generating tiny waste particles that can get inside food packages completely undetected.

No matter the size of the food proces-



Above: Made from 100-percent Canadian wheat, the Cedar Valley brand pita chips are fried in coconut oil to make sure that they are completely free from saturated fats, while maintaining their all-natural ingredient deck and flavorful, crunchy texture and taste profile.

Right: The family-size, resealable stand-up pouches used by Cedar Valley Selections to package its retail product are made from a three-layer structure containing a middle aluminum foil line to extend the product's shelf-life and freshness.

sor, they can experience contaminate issues whether they have metal detectors or not.

The reality is that these devices have their technological limitations, and even though they are operating as designed and the line inspection doesn't yield a concern, foreign material contamination concerns can still occur, and these problems can find their way to the market.

Happily for them, a new third-party X-Ray product inspection and reclamation service started up two years ago by **PLAN Automation** in Bolton, Ont., offers a convenient and cost-effective way for food producers to find out whether their 'on-hold' product is truly contaminated and the extent of that contamination.

By doing that, more often than not the companies can reclaim a significant por-

tion of their inspected products by virtue of them still being safe for human consumption, since contamination typically affects only a small portion of the suspected product batch.

Since opening up the 15,000-square-foot reclaim facility in Bolton about a year ago, PLAN Automation has served an estimated 500 customers looking to ascertain the safety of their product, according to PLAN Automation president J.P. Perreault, while saving an estimated \$50 million worth of product from the landfill this year alone.

As Perreault points out, "In addition to saving customers money by enabling them to sell the reclaimed product, there is also the environmental issue related to sending food out to the landfill because it produces methane, which is extremely

detrimental to the environment.

"So instead of essentially throwing food into garbage, companies can use our service to pinpoint the problems and send the uncontaminated product back into the retail market, which is a better solution both for the environment and the consumers."

Says Perreault: "It doesn't matter how much food you direct to the landfill: it all has an impact on the price of food on the retail shelf.

"Even if the companies use insurance to mitigate some of their losses, eventually their premiums will rise later at some point, and those costs will eventually find their way into the price of that product on retail shelves," Perreault states, "affecting food security."

As Perreault relates, it is often the



Clockwise from left Automated weigh scales dispensing bulk product into the buckets in precise portion sizes; company co-founder Surria Fadel performs an informal taste test; the back of the Cedar Valley brand bags relating the family Fadel family story behind the product; plant employee looking thoroughly inspects the bucket elevator conveyor where a missing metal bolt caused a serious food safety scare; fried pita chips being dispensed into product transfer buckets straight from the seasoning drum.



smaller food producers who can least afford to simply throw away their product if they suspect product contamination, just as they are the least likely to be able to afford losing a client due to a food safety issue.

This was exactly what recently happened to **Cedar Valley Selections**, a small but fast-growing producer of

all-natural fried pita chips based in Windsor, Ont.

Founded in 2017 by a mother-and-son team of Surria and Ameen Fadel, the company sprang into being as Ameen's high-school project aimed at sharing his family's authentic recipes inspired by its heritage in the Beqaa Valley of Lebanon.

"After I received a \$3,000 grant from

my high school, I partnered with my mom to bring her authentic home-made pita chips to Canadian families," says company president Ameen.

Fried in coconut oil and made without any artificial ingredients or preservatives, the square-shaped chips currently come in four delicious flavor varieties—including *Classic Spice*, *Sea Salt*, *Garlic & Herb* and *Cinnamon Sugar*—crafted at a 5,000-square foot HACCP-accredited facility primarily managed by his co-founder mother.

"Our products are now sold across Canada and major retailers such as Sobeys, Whole Foods, Loblaws, Costco and a variety of other grocery outlets," Ameen relates.

"You can find them in about 1,300 stores across Canada from coast to coast, and in every province," he says.

"You can also buy them online on our website and also on Amazon," he adds, "to have them delivered right to your residence."

With a pending move to a bigger 11,000-square-foot production plant slated for the end of this year, Ameen says he expects to grow the company's listings to about 3,000 to 4,000 stores in the next couple of years, as well as try his luck in the nearby U.S. markets.

"Obviously we will need to have more automation, scale and capacity," he says, "but we have good team members and business partners who we know can help us reach our goals and expand our distri-



tribution across North America.

“It has been just awesome to see our products on store shelves across the country,” Ameen states. “The business is booming, and we are very thankful for that.”

Made from 100-percent Canadian wheat, the *Cedar Valley* brand pita chips are currently sold in 180-gram single-serve bags and in the larger family-sized 540-gram stand-up pouches made from a three-layer film structure containing an inner foil layer for extra product freshness and shelf-life.

The high-quality pouches are beautifully decorated with vivid and confident product photography on a black background with large white lettering combined to give the package a distinctly high-end look that Ameen is eager to make a more common sight on the retail level.

While the current location has capacity to produce up 6,000 bags of product daily, Ameen says the company expect to easily double that output at its new factory.

According to Ameen, the company is already working on obtaining the vaunted international *BRC* product safety standard certification, which will open up new international markets for Cedar Valley to pursue.

“Being a food manufacturer food safety is obviously a key part of our operation,” says Ameen, “both from the legal standpoint and for quality control.

“We always strive to make sure that food safety and quality go hand-in-hand by striving to provide our customer with the best experience when they’re crunching down on our pita chips.

“We want to ensure that everything that goes out our door is safe for consumers to consume.”

Despite taking all the safety precautions required by the plant’s *HACCP* certification, a few months ago Cedar Valley was stricken by a potentially devas-

tating safety scare when the plant’s maintenance staff discovered that the plant’s bucket elevator conveyor in the packaging area was missing a metal bolt.

Unable to find the missing bolt anywhere on the plant floor, the plant staff concluded, correctly, that the bolt must have ended up in one of the thousands of finished bags of product processed that day, which amounted to 14 full pallet loads of product.

After trying everything to locate the bolt, including going over the load with a hand-held hobby metal detectors designed for outdoor treasure hunting, the company had to make a hard choice on what it had to do with the suspected low.

“Initially I wasn’t sure what to do because this kind of thing never happened to us before,” recalls Surria Fadel.

“Nothing we tried to do ourselves worked, so we reached out to our packaging supplier in London, who then connected us with J.P. Perreault of PLAN Automation.

“After a few emails and phone conversations, he explained to me who they would go through our entire product case by case at their facility with their X-Ray machine until they identified the contaminant, after which they would and all the good product back to us.

“So we arranged our carrier to send that load to them,” Surria recalls, “and within a day they called to tell us that they were able to identify the contaminant well before completing the whole load.

“Of course, they proceeded to check all the remaining bags we shipped them to confirm that the damage was limited to just one bag, which as a huge relief for us,” Surria recalls.

“It was really beautiful,” she says, complimenting PLAN Automation for the quick turnaround of just three day and the extensive report and documentation they have provided to confirm and validate the safety of that Cedar Valley batch of chips.

**Above left
PLAN Automation technician performing X-Ray inspection on one of several high-performance PXT X-Ray systems, manufactured by Eagle Product inspection, house at the company’s Bolton facility.**

**Above right
A colorful merchandising display filled with high-impact bags of Cedar Valley pita chips.**

“It certainly relieved a lot of stress and anxiety I had experienced after we first realized we had a problem,” Surria states.

Hearing that thousands of dollars’ worth of our product was saved from landfill was just phenomenal, she recalls.

“I’m still holding on to that bolt as a very detailed PLAN Automation report outlining exactly what they did, what they found, and what the final results of their investigation showed.

“It’s a very useful thing for us to have for traceability and quality purposes,” Surria states.

According to PLAN Automation’s vice-president Mat Bedard, this final report is actually an amalgamation of several reports that the company prepares at different stages of the entire rigorous process.

As Bedard explains, “Once a customer discovers that they have a problem, they place a ‘discovery’ call to us and we ask a few questions to determine if we can help them—usually making the decision by the end of that discussion.

“If we are comfortable with the detectability of the problem, we move on to the co-ordination phase, at which point we do a full inspection study.

“This inspection study is based on a detailed test where we take the product with the foreign bodies embedded in it,



and proceed with a full-blown, detailed test.

“The inspection study is a scientifically and statistically proven test to demonstrate our inspection capabilities,” he continues, “this inspection study report provides our inspection capabilities and is the basis of our performance guarantee for the product recovery.

“Once the customer has confidence to proceed with the service, we provide a formal quotation for the service, and if the customer is happy with the cost and our capabilities, we will then proceed with the recovery,” Bedard says.

“After the product has been inspected and the foreign bodies have been isolated and labelled, we re-package all the product that was not contaminated and either ship it back to customer or arrange for a pick-up by customer.

“We then provide a detailed statistical and traceability report that outlines all the relevant information about the recovery process, along with a calibration report for all the equipment used in that recovery,” Bedard elaborates.

“In addition, we save all the X-ray images for the product we inspected, and provide all relevant reporting and statistical process controls such as bar charts and histograms that can be used for traceability purposes.

“We also remove the flagged rejects for further identification and documentation, and we send the fully completed report to the customer using a confidential digital portal,” says Bedard.

According to Ameen, the PLAN Automation service saved Cedar Valley about \$18,000 worth of product on this occasion.

“For a business of our size, that’s a fairly substantial amount of money,” Ameen points out.

“It’s capital that we can reinvest in other areas of our business to make it stronger still,” says Ameen, saying he expects the company to accelerate its growth at the new facility to show the market that Cedar Valley Selections is a really serious player in its chosen market segment.

Above
A stretchwrapped, fully-inspected and repacked pallet load of product has a special seal of approval attached to it to validate that the product can be safely sold after undergoing a rigorous and thorough X-Ray inspection.

Right
Bolton plant employees performing an X-Ray inspection and rework service on glass jars of tomato sauce, one jar at a time, to make sure there are no glass fragments or other tiny contaminants inside the filled and sealed containers.



“We have a big opportunity,” Ameen explains. “There is only one really big pita chip manufacturer in North America, and our intention is to change that game around by bringing a real better-for-you product into the market.

“We really believe we can do that,” he states. “Once we are BRC-verified and have all our automation and scale in place, we will be looking to make an entry into the U.S., quick-service outlets, airports ... we want to see our chips everywhere!”

Says Ameen: “Today’s consumers are looking for a better ‘free from everything’ products made with healthy oils, such as coconut oil.

“I think we really have a competitive advantage because there are a lot of consumers looking for this kind of product.

“It is very much on trend, with the

Middle Eastern diet being ranked as the healthiest diet in the world,” he says.


“With a good product to market, a great team to make it, and an ability to scale will put us on a path to reach a leadership position in North America,” he states.

“Naturally, the more a company grows the bigger challenges it will face,” Ameen points out, “including food safety.

“But having a partner like PLAN Automation nearby to help us out in those tough times gives us great confidence about providing a high-quality product to the market and a perfectly safe product for consumers to enjoy.”

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▶ To see a video about how PLAN Automation helped Cedar Valley Selections address its potentially devastating food safety issue, go to Canadian Packaging TV at www.canadianpackaging.com