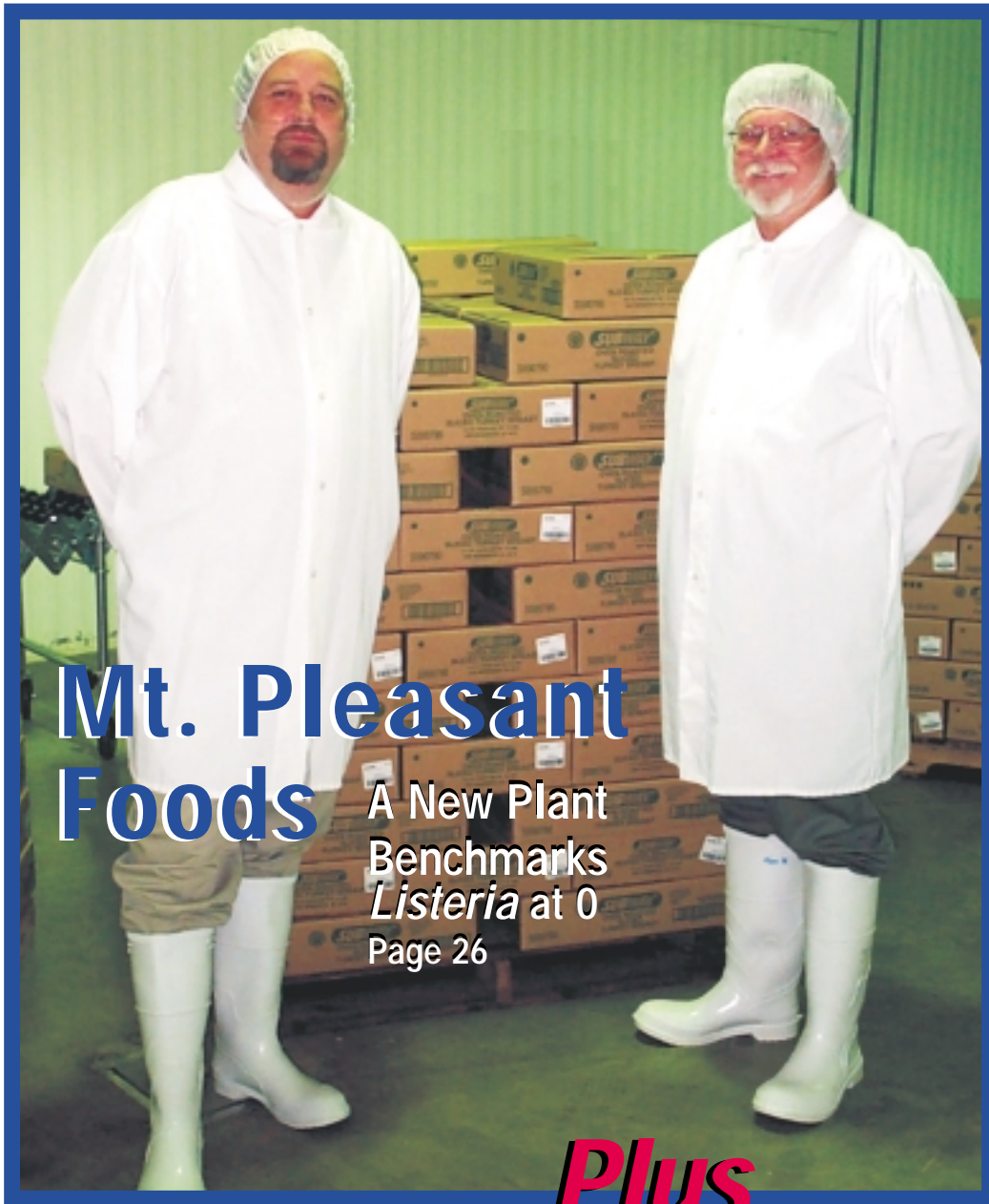


Learn why Weber slicers were chosen for new state-of-the-art meat processing plant (details within reprinted story)

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Mt. Pleasant Foods

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Listeria

Benchmark: 0

Mt. Pleasant Foods establishes the standard for ready-to-eat slicing plants.



Controlled Entry: Only clean-room suited and trained personnel are permitted beyond this door to the "hot zone."



From the outside Mt. Pleasant Foods, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, the newest plant addition to Iowa-based ITGC, looks similar to many other single-story structures found in industrial parks across America. Truck bays line one side of the flat-roof building, banked by a small parking lot. The main entrance is attractive but unremarkable. Not until a visitor reaches the heart of the facility does the magic begin, though there is no sleight-of-hand at work here — just experience, ingenuity, and visionary planning. This meat slicing plant is unprecedented in the U.S. meat industry. It has delivered more than 500 negative tests for *Listeria*, and plate counts from tests of products processed at Mt. Pleasant are roughly 96-percent clean. Mt. Pleasant Foods slices and packages cooked meat and poultry products without microbial contamination, and this occurs by design. The plant opened in April 2003 and will probably be processing at capacity within a year.

How did ITGC achieve these accomplishments? The company's management borrowed the clean-room concept from the pharmaceutical industry and created the technology transfer to make it work in a meat plant.

"Ed [Ed Garrett, senior vice president and COO] and I have worked in a number of processing facilities around the country," explains Ken Rutledge, president and CEO of West Liberty Foods, which is headquartered in West Liberty, Iowa. "When we started talking about this plant we reviewed everything that we had seen during our time in the industry, and we tried to correct all of the issues at Mt. Pleasant."

The 50,000-square-foot structure features 12 isolated slicing rooms, each with positive air flow and each independent of one another. Each room even has its own separate drain that runs out of the building and can be sealed and flushed with disinfectant to be cleaned from end to end. The only areas the rooms have in common are the receiving area and a common pack-out area, where packages of sliced meats are cartoned and palletized for shipping.

"I don't know of another plant like this in the world!" Rutledge boasts. "At least that's what one of our suppliers who travels all over the world told me." It was Rutledge and Garrett who conceived, birthed, and nurtured the Mt. Pleasant facility, which is the third plant for ITGC.

Their vision married a pioneering concept with available technology, and when technology came up short, they created their own to fulfill their needs for a plant that would receive cooked product, slice it under clean-room conditions, and package sliced meats that were free of compromising and dangerous microbes. Their dream operation was conceived virtually from the ground up.

"We know how to slice lunch meat and we know how to put in the best systems possible to ensure that it is safe. And we have done that," Garrett says.

"Creating a new facility had not been anticipated this quickly," Ken Rutledge comments. "We utilized a

"We had seen every kind of slicer that was available and we chose the Weber slicer because its ease of cleanability was equal to or greater than any other machine..."

Ed Garrett
Vice President

Sliceability: Split cooked logs of meat that are ready for slicing under clean-room conditions.



Ready to Go: West Liberty Foods executives Ken Rutledge, president and CEO (right), and Ed Garrett, senior vice president and COO, inspect pallets of sliced lunch meat for Subway sandwiches in the pack-out area, ready for shipping from the company's new slicing plant in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.



Quality Checking: Clean-room staff double checks the integrity of turkey slices as they stack them for sealing in two-pound packages.

piece of the cold storage space here at West Liberty to handle expanding production, and then another, and pretty soon we were filled up. Demand outstripped our space. In 2000, we picked up another former Oscar Mayer facility in Sigourney, Iowa, and expanded our cooking capacity." Soon both West Liberty and Sigourney were at capacity, and the board members [of the Iowa Turkey Growers Cooperative, which owns the plants] and management began to discuss a new facility.

"When we started talking, we thought in the usual line of putting in blenders and mixers and having fabrication and cooking going on," Rutledge recalls, "and then we realized that this was our golden opportunity to segregate raw and cooked completely and that's what we did." Only cooked product goes into the Mt. Pleasant facility.

The managers found a parcel of land in Mt. Pleasant for the new operation, an area with an available work force that promised a solid work ethic, erected the plant, and opened in April 2003. By the end of the first year, Mt. Pleasant's original 12 rooms will be full and the plant will be ready for expansion, another option that was planned for

The design and layout of the structure permit construction of an addition that mirrors the original, and doubles the plant's production capacity.

A Tale of Survival

Not only is this new plant newsworthy, the company itself is a Cinderella story, arising from the ruins of a local turkey industry that was hearing a death knell when Oscar Mayer closed its processing plant in central Iowa, leaving local turkey growers without processing capability. But some original plains-pioneering spirit remained among these hardy flatlanders, and the farmers, exhibiting the fearlessness of their forebearers, became entrepreneurs and risk-takers.

They organized themselves into the Iowa Turkey Growers Cooperative, then purchased the old plant and recruited Rutledge from California-based Zacky Foods to run it for them (see "The Iowa Phoenix," *Meat Processing*, Oct. 2000, page 28). Rutledge called in another Zacky alum, Roger Brown, now vice president of marketing, to help him get the business moving before all of the trained workers left the area, and they had the plant running and were putting turkey in the stor-

age freezer just to keep their skilled people.

In the beginning, Rutledge says, "Our goal was to grow from about \$60 million in sales when we started to \$200 million. We've surpassed that and our next goal is to get to \$500 million." The company has shifted from processing turkey products for its growers to a manufacturer for branded meat and poultry companies. Though it is considering launching an Iowa-only small branded line of turkey products, ITGC primarily provides the brick and mortar for other companies that need product produced.

Mt. Pleasant Foods chose Weber because: "...the reliability was excellent and the repair and maintenance cost were low."

Ed Garrett
Vice President

The company's success has surprised everyone, including the farmers who bet everything they had on ITGC and Rutledge's skills, and despite some lean, early years, the firm grew quickly and steadily. The once-cavernous West Liberty facility began to fill as the company's reputation for quality product processing spread. "Things really came together for us after Sara Lee's Bil-Mar placed a major portion of its production at West Liberty Foods," Rutledge explains. "That absolutely jump-started us." That was the turning point for ITGC, Ken says, because after that other customers finally believed the company would become solid and were confident enough to commit their own processing needs. "We were sort of inching along until the Bil-Mar commitment happened."

But ITGC is not a turkey company any more, Rutledge notes, because today at its plants at West Liberty, Sigourney, and Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, the product line ranges through beef, veal, pork, turkey, and cheese. "We are a food company," he says.

No Bugs Permitted

Ed Garrett was the third executive to move from Zacky to West Liberty, and it was ultimately Garrett and Rutledge who assigned Dick Woodford, a long-time ITGC employee, as the local general contractor to erect the Mt. Pleasant facility. "He executed my drawings," Garrett says, adding, "We knew that we wanted this new plant to be the safest lunch meat facility that we could imagine how to build, so we planned strictly a slice/packaging operation. We tried to design the problems out and the strengths into this operation."

The ITGC team looked at ways to control bacteria, sanitation, cleaning, and at its product mix. Mt. Pleasant's single-operation slicing room concept was the answer. "Each independent mini-plant has its own air, its own water, its own stainless steel drain with no elbows or joints, that lead outside of the building into a common manhole. And each of these drains makes that outside connection at different tiers and different angles; there is no link among them." Garrett notes that each drain can be sealed and flood sanitized, and that is only one of the ways the facility is unfriendly to bacteria.

"With the drains, a critical *Listeria* source under control, we looked at other opportunities to keep bacteria out of the slicing room. Refrigeration units were a concern because they are tough to clean and they collect air



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particles. So we took them out of the room, put them up in the attic, dog-housed them, and then cleaned the emerging air and pumped it into an individual room through small vents. Each room has its own refrigeration unit. Then that cooled air is moved out from the slicing room into the packaging area so there are no refrigeration units hanging there to gather contaminants."

With those critical areas covered they erected each room with stainless steel anti-microbial walls that were erected over a sub-floor before the final layer of anti-microbial flooring was poured. "These are not movable walls," Ken laughs.

The Product

Attention then turned to the product itself. The cooked products come into the slicing operation from the West Liberty plant or from their customer in six-foot logs. Receiving checks product temperature and quality, and ensures that the correct product was received. It then enters a holding cooler until it is ready for further processing. Product logs that are to be browned are sanitized, stripped, and then run through the oil fryer for browning. When the product exits the fryer on the conveyor a temperature check ensures it is in spec, with the inside at appropriate slicing temperature.

All products coming in from an outside source go automatically through a casing washer system and then are loaded into the plant's stainless steel tanks for another wash and an automatic casing log peeler strips the casing off.

"We know that in front of the slicer we have the best system, so we wanted to have a final kill step of surface bacteria that might have recontaminated the product somewhere immediately prior to slicing. We have Ultratherm infrared units in line. Oklahoma State conducted a study on the technology's ability for reduction at different levels of contamination, and we are developing a protocol to meet USDA regulations for risk," Garrett explains.

All products coming in from an outside source go automatically through a casing washer system and then are loaded into the plant's stainless steel tanks for another wash and an automatic casing log peeler strips the casing off. Some logs are browned, some are crusted, and all ultimately move into the slicing room.

The Hot Zone

As with product, all people entering the processing section of the plant follow procedures that coordinate with the plant's pathogen-control efforts. Visitors don smocks, pull on boots, and pass through one of three automatic boot washing stations. The unit features three high-tech scrubbers that brush the boots while Ecolab sanitizers are pumped over the surfaces to remove and kill any opportunistic organism.

But this procedure only permits entry to areas outside of the "hot zone," an area that surrounds and encompasses the 12 individual slicing rooms. Only trained employees may enter that area and each must be specially garbed and pass through another boot

washing station. People entering the hot zone take a packaged clean-room uniform from the rack and don upper and lower garments and a hood that only reveals the eye area of the face; sleeves are sealed at the wrist and gloves cover hands. These specially designed garments are supplied and maintained by Cintas, which specially launders, sanitizes, and then vacuum-seals each uniform in a clean-room at the Cintas laundering facility in North Carolina, one of seven of the company's clean-room uniform processing facilities in the country. Blue clean-room uniforms are for supervisors and maintenance people; white is for quality control and those operating the slicers. And each time an employee leaves that secure area they must take off the clean-room uniform, only to don another before reentering. Each employee averages five clean-room uniforms a day each.

And each employee has been carefully trained, both during the company's 16-hour pre-employment food-safety training school (which does not guarantee employment), and with after-hire specialized training courses. This is another of Mt. Pleasant's anti-contamination tools: knowledge.

Staying Competitive

Because of its innovative design, the facility was more costly to build and costs more to run, but, Garrett says, the efficiencies planned into its operation make up the difference. "We have plenty of volume here, and the conveyor systems, end-line oil browner, and in-line cruster add to our efficiency, bringing down costs."

Part of that efficiency comes through volume customers. "We have turned down customers," Rutledge adds, "because they couldn't give us enough volume for a shift. We do not stop and change products. There has to be enough to last through the two production shifts." Currently lines one through four are dedicated to Subway products, running two shifts for five and six days a week. ITGC's three plants slice and package for some of the largest retailers and other restaurant chains, also.

Two employees in the slicing room receive the logs that are conveyed through a small window. The log is divided and fed into a Weber slicing machine.

Each room contains a complete set of tools, so if one of the slicers or Dixie packagers needs maintenance, nothing from another area needs to enter the room. The mechanics work in the hot zone and stay there for their entire day. Supplies for each room, including rolls of film for each day, are planned, sanitized, and loaded into each slicing room during the clean-up time. Nothing but the garmented employees and cooked product enters the slicing room during the slicing and packaging day.

"We have all brand new equipment and we can slice anything anybody else can slice," Garrett boasts. "When we have all 12 rooms operating full time we will be slicing 1.5 million pounds of product a week. With expansion we will move up to three million pounds a week. After that we will need another facility."

When it came to choosing the slicer they would install in the facility, Garrett



Coffin Cases: These stainless steel cases were designed at the West Liberty operation to protect the integrity of cooked logs during transportation to the Mt. Pleasant facility.

looked at every option. "We had seen every kind of slicer that was available to do the work, and we chose the Weber slicer because its ease of cleanability was equal to or greater than any other machine, the reliability was excellent, and the repair and maintenance cost were low. We did test the yields of slicers, and the yields are related to how you do the job, who is doing the job, not so much the equipment. If we set the product up right, blend it right, do everything right, we will get good yields off of anybody's slicer."

Garrett explains that application is the key to choosing packaging machines. "Some of our lines," he says, "are workhorse food-service lines. We buy basic non-whistle-and-bell units in stainless steel for easy cleanability." He notes that they are testing a new unit, though he would not say any more about it. Packages of sliced meat emerge from the slicing room completely sealed and ready for packing in cartons. This manual operation ensures that a final quality check is made. Leakers are sanitized and sent back into the slicing room. The Dixie unit is the most prevalent at the Mt. Pleasant facility, but Multivac and Tiromats are used at West Liberty and Sigourney Foods.

"Our long-term goal will be to segregate our raw and cooked completely, and we are in an intermediate step right now," Rutledge said. "If we have a continuous-cook hot dog operation, which we don't have now, it has to start with raw material and be moved to finished material, and other processes such as taco mixes require raw and finished product in the same facility. That type of operation may move into West Liberty or Sigourney, also." Sigourney Foods currently processes, cooks, and slices roast beef. Mp

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