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Michael Orsini,
President,
Les Aliments Bercy

GROW & PROSPER

Organic Product Mix and Sustainable Packaging Pay Off for Bercy Foods

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Michael Orsini, president of the Montreal-based Bercy Foods, shows off some of his company's Bio Buenisima organic fruits that are shipped in Norampac's waxless NorShield boxes.

ORGANIC GROWTH

A healthy mix of organic products and sustainable packaging keeps Montreal produce company in the green

BY ANDREW JOSEPH, FEATURES EDITOR
PHOTOS BY PIERRE LONGTIN

A diet rich in fruits and veggies has long been touted as a key prerequisite for sound nutritional health and lifestyle, and it has done absolute wonders in the last three years for the financial well-being of Montreal-based **Les Aliments Bercy (Bercy Foods)**—a family-owned processor and packager of fresh produce that is quickly emerging as one of the Canadian industry's more progressive and environmentally-conscious players.

Operating as an offshoot of **Courchesne Larose Ltd.**—one of Canada's oldest and largest fruit and vegetable importers and distributors—Bercy may not yet be quite the household word its owners want it to become one day, but with revenues of over \$20 million in 2009, there appears to be plenty of growth upside and momentum for a business that has only opened up its doors in 2007.

"Business has been great for us since we began operations," says company president Michael Orsini, who is also a co-owner of the fast-growing enterprise named after a downtown Montreal street where Courchesne Larose, owned by the Routhier family, was founded more than 90 years ago.

So great in fact, Orsini relates, that the upstart company has already had to move its operations twice to a bigger facility—having relocated to its current state-of-the-art, 40,000-square-foot premises in Montreal's north end last year.

"It already feels as though we may need to move into an even larger facility yet again to keep up with our growth, so that we can add processing lines for both fruits and vegetables," Orsini told *Canadian Packaging* in a recent interview.

Serving high-profile foodservice operators and retailers across eastern Canada—including the likes of **Metro (Metro Richelieu Inc.)**, **Sobeys Inc.** and **Costco Wholesale Canada Ltd.**—the company offers an extensive range of processed and packaged produce, with certified organic products now accounting for about half of Bercy's 300 or so SKUs (stock-keeping units).

According to Orsini, being able to offer clients an organic alternative to the conventionally-farmed fruits and veggies gives Bercy an important competitive advantage and point-of-differentiation in a fiercely competitive industry, despite the considerable extra effort required in sourcing the product from farmers in places like Mexico, Guatemala, Morocco and the U.S. state of Florida.

"Dealing with organics can be quite difficult," says Orsini, citing the company's extensive product portfolio comprising products such as grape and cherry tomatoes, snow peas and sugar snap peas, avocados, all types of citrus, and stone fruits such as peaches, plums, cherries, etc.

"While the growing consumer demand for the organics is a good thing, the sourcing of a full line of organically-grown produce is a considerable challenge—especially now that we are promoting more and more Fair Trade-sourced prod-

ucts, utilizing a market-based approach to help producers in developing countries obtain better trading conditions and to promote more sustainable farming practices.

"Organic, pesticide-free and chemical-free products are what we insist on," says Orsini. "Also, because we know that taste plays a huge role at the end of the day, we have purposely opted to source only the closer-to-maturity harvests—thus ensuring that our organic fruits and veggies get a chance to gain more body and taste."

The current Bercy Foods facility already houses a total of 12 packaging lines—comprising equipment supplied by **PFM Packaging Machinery Corp.**, **SACMI USA Ltd.** and some custom-made machinery—to turn out the company's own **Buenisima** and **Bio Buenisima** produce brands, as well as private-label offerings such as **Delicioso** and **Bio Delicioso** for the Metro stores and **Think Bio** for Sobeys.

"We also package veggie snack trays with health-conscious dips on a side, as well as many consumer-ready packages of all types of fruits and vegetables," Orsini points out, adding that Bercy guarantees its customers delivery of all its packaged and unpackaged products within 12 hours of order placement.

While Orsini says the company is currently looking to add another dedicated packaging line for fruit processing applications, he stresses that Bercy

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ORGANIC GROWTH

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has made a concerted effort to ensure that all of its existing lines keep their environmental footprint as low as possible by using as many sustainable packaging products and systems as they can from start to finish.

For example, Bercy uses only vegetable-based inks for its produce labels; 100-percent recyclable and/or compostable corrugated trays; and the fully-recyclable **RD45g Anti Fog** flexible film from the **Sealed Air Corporation**, which is processed into plastic packaging on **Shanklin Corporation's** model **Omni S** form/fill/seal and shrinkwrapping system.

"Our goal is to go '100-percent green' by using a lot of creativity," Orsini states, "while still keeping our value-added benefits as simple, safe and cost-efficient as possible for our retail customers."

"We have determined that nowadays the consumer has a greater awareness of packaging and its disposal ... that not everything is actually recyclable and that there are issues with cross-contamination, but for all that the consumers are still demanding to have more convenient, pre-packaged products that are ready-to-serve."

Maintaining this careful balancing act between environmental concerns and demands of its customers and consumers has gotten a little easier, according to Orsini, since the company began using the recently-developed **NorShield** waxless boxes manufactured by Canada's leading corrugated packaging producer **Norampac**, a division of the Kingsey Falls, Que.-headquartered forest products group **Cascades Canada Inc.**

Containing no wax, nylon or plastic, the highly waterproof and humidity-resistant **NorShield** box made a big splash in the Canadian packaging industry circles last year for providing produce growers and shippers with a completely recyclable and 100-percent recycled fiber alternative for shipping and distributing their products—picking up the **Green Innovation** prize from the **Quebec Association of Industrial Research** and the **Gold Award** in the **2009 Sustainable Packaging Leadership Awards**



PET clamshell packages containing cherry tomatoes pass by the Linx model 7300FG continuous inkjet coder.



Part of the Vassoyo trayformer, a Nordson ProBlue 7 adhesive melter seals the corner flaps of the trays.

competition of the Toronto-headquartered **PAC - The Packaging Association**.

"It's a perfect sustainable packaging solution for us," explains Orsini. "Norampac has long been known a green company with deep commitment to sustainability, so it didn't really surprise me when they came out with this wonderful new product."

"After plastics, corrugated waxed cartons are the second-largest component in landfills," he expands, "so using the **NorShield** box enabled us to act in a more environmentally responsible way by not contributing to the landfill problem further."

Unlike the traditional shipping carriers that were coated with wax to achieve the required water resistance, the **NorShield** box incorporates a water-based acrylic that is size-pressed into both sides of **NorShield** paper at Norampac's linerboard mill in Mississauga, Ont., to penetrate the paperboard fibers by 50 to 70 microns to achieve the adequate level of water protection.



The brown-colored Norampac **NorShield** boxes used by Bercy for shipping its Buensima brand of produce.

Orsini says Bercy uses the plain **NorShield** boxes for shipping its conventionally-farmed produce, while utilizing the green-colored versions for all its organic products packaged in the clear, food-grade PET (polyethylene terephthalate) plastic clamshells, supplied by **Reynolds Food Packaging LLC** and other packaging producers.

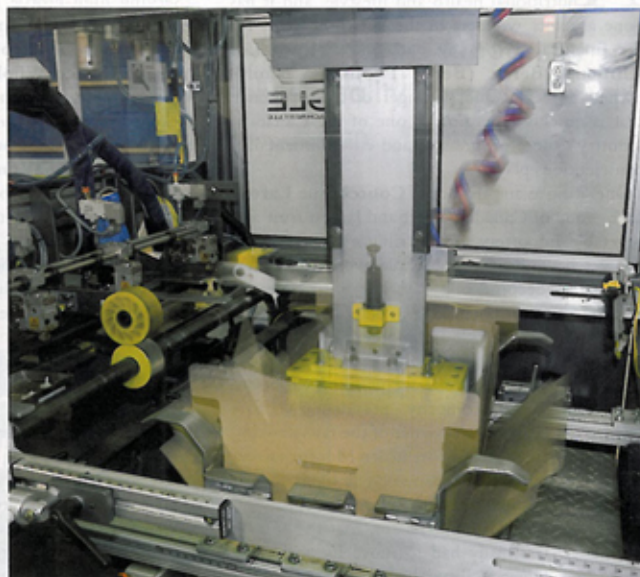
With packaging being such an integral part of Bercy's operations, the company naturally makes a constant effort to keep its extensive arsenal of packaging machinery on the leading edge of technology, according to Orsini.

"We have a vast array of packaging line equipment that we utilize in our day-to-day operations," reveals Orsini. "We have everything from weighers, shrinktunnels and cutters to overwrappers, fillers, netting and punnet equipment."

Orsini says the company is always on the lookout for new high-performance packaging machinery that can improve its operations, citing



A worker places clear PET plastic clamshell containers manufactured by Reynolds Foods Packaging onto an inserter line as tomatoes move up the food-grade conveyor for packing.



A close-up view of the Vassoyo trayformer used to erect **NorShield** boxes at robust throughput speeds of up to 45 trays per minute.



recent purchase of the *Vassoyo* model trayformer manufactured by **Eagle Packaging LLC**, a Miami, Fla.-based subsidiary of the Montreal-headquartered machine-builder **WeighPack Systems Inc.** specializing in end-of-line packaging systems and equipment.

"Because of our company's quick growth, we discovered that in order to keep up with the soaring demand, we urgently needed a trayformer," recalls Orsini. "After seeing what Eagle had to offer, and establishing that they were able to meet our specific application demands, we had it installed in no time at all."

Designed and engineered for optimal reliability and low maintenance requirements, the high-efficiency *Vassoyo* trayformer can run a wide assortment of tray sizes and styles—including standard end slot, side slot and clamshell, with or without a lid—at throughput speeds of up to 45 trays per minute.

"I can truly state that in the seven months we've had the machine, it has run smoothly for us since Day One," relates Orsini, while complimenting the attached model *ProBlue 7* adhesive melter—manufactured by **Nordson Corporation**—used to seal shut the corner flaps of the trays.

Boasting a *Teflon*-coated tank with seven-liter capacity, the *ProBlue 7* features reliable piston-pump technology and three-sided access for quick cleaning and filling, notes Orsini, ensuring optimal machine uptime and easy upkeep.

"We are very happy with our *Vassoyo* trayformer and the *ProBlue* adhesive melter—both have been working great for us," Orsini extols.

Other equipment utilized in Bercy plant's day-to-day operations includes:

- Four model *Linx 7300FG* continuous inkjet coding machines—manufactured by **Linx Printing Technologies Ltd.** and supplied by the Saint-Léonard, Que.-based **Visuascan Inc.**—to apply all the relevant time, date and other



Some of Bercy's organic products packaged in RD 45g Anti Fog recyclable film.



A fully-packed tray of cherry tomatoes sorted, washed and packaged into food-grade PET clamshells.

key product information onto packaging using food-grade inks;

- Several custom-manufactured brush- and tsunami-style produce washers;
- High-end X-ray inspection and metal detection equipment, purchased in 2008 from the Toronto-based **Smiths Detection Canada Ltd.**

"Food safety is naturally a huge priority for us—not only in respect to our customers' safety but also for the safety of the end-user, the consumer," says Orsini, pointing out that the plant's staff is fully-trained in all aspects of rigorous product traceability compliance and quality assurance.

"We go through great lengths to ensure that every single item that leaves our door is pre-washed before packing," he adds, "and all of the disinfectants we use in our facility are fully-biodegradable and organic-certified, without exception."

"It is a natural extension of our commitment to

using eco-friendly packaging," Orsini concludes.

"It has always been my opinion that if you are going to purchase fruits and veggies for public consumption, they should always come from the greenest and cleanest sources possible." ♦

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