



BACK TO SCHOOL BASICS

Manufacturer of peanut-free treats tastes success with sharp new paperboard packaging

BY ANDREW JOSEPH, FEATURES EDITOR
PHOTOS BY COLE GARSIDE

Even the most jaded consumer might wonder how a baked, sweet-tasting treat can be moist to the palette even after immediately being taken from the freezer. But when you also factor in that the product is nut and peanut-free, it's easy to see why one Ontario-based bakery has found the winning recipe to success. It just wasn't overnight, though.

Treasure Mills Inc. bakes and packages *School Safe*, a nut- and peanut-free brand of sweet treats that defies logic by being healthy and nutritious, while also providing a very tasty product that both kids and adults can enjoy.

With 45 employees working at the 30,000-square-foot, 100-per-cent nut- and peanut-free HACCP (*Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points*)-certified manufacturing and baking facility in Newmarket, Ont., Treasure Mills company president and chief executive officer Robert Johnson explains that despite knowing he had a fantastic product, the road to success was a hard-fought battle for him.



Controlled by a Rockwell Automation Allen-Bradley PanelView Plus 700 (top left) operator panel, a Campbell Wrapper Heritage horizontal flowwrapper with film supplied by Vista-Pak is used to individually seal in the freshness of its *School Safe* baked products.



Thanks to a new paperboard window package from Cascades, the Newmarket, Ont.-based Treasure Mills has had a successful launch of its *School Safe* brand of individually-wrapped peanut- and nut-free baked treats.

The trials and tribulations of Treasure Mills began in 2003 when Johnson purchased a bread bakery that was in receivership, he recalls although the determining factor in buying the facility was that it was built to launch a line of frozen breads, and thus had ample freezing capacity.

"I'm an entrepreneur," Johnson told *Canadian Packaging* during a recent visit to the facility. "Despite the set-up, I decided not to do breads, and instead created nut- and peanut-free cookies.

"At that time, believe it or not, we were the first commercial company in that particular game."

Not one to do anything small, Johnson launched his cookies with both **Loblaws Companies Limited** and **Sobeys Inc.**, but in order to keep up with demand, the company needed more cash-flow to purchase more production equipment. To help tide things over, Johnson purchased a working bread business, and while he acknowledges that it is a tough business to compete in, he continued to build it up between 2004 and 2006 doing business with Sobeys and other private-label enterprises.

However, when **Effem Foods** got into the nut- and peanut-free cookie business in 2006, Johnson sold his bread business and poured the money back into the baked sweet products.

"When Effem got into the peanut-free retail sector, we tried to launch our own nut- and peanut-free product into a more niche sector," notes Johnson about his *School Safe* brand of cookies. "We looked—and continue to look—not at targeting people with allergies; rather targeting everyone that has to deal with the school mandate banning nut and peanut products."

"We launched, and we had a bit of success," recounts Johnson. "But because our product was considered baked goods, we were limited with a shelf life of only 12 to 14 days."

Despite the fact that the cookies were individually flowwrapped and hand-placed into a paperboard closeable tray, Johnson needed to find a way to extend the life of the product on the shelf.

"One way we did that was to take all of our baked and packaged goods and then freeze them. When retailers were ready to place them on the shelf, they could unfreeze them and then code it themselves with a best-before date," says Johnson.

"By doing things via this method, we saved a couple of days on our end, and while the product remains frozen, its shelf-life remains static. The shelf-life is only a concern after the initial thawing of the product by our customers.

"We had more success, to be sure, but it wasn't good enough," offers Johnson. "I knew I was going to have to try and launch the product for a third time if I wanted this company to thrive like I knew it should."

Determined that if he was going to fail he would not go down without a fight, Johnson hired noted packaging design guru Don Watts of **DW+Partners Inc.**, a retail strategy and design group based in Toronto, to create a new brand icon and a new 12-pack container for the product that was launched in 2008.

"Along with bright and colorful graphics, we added a large clear window to the top lid, which allows the customer to see a part of each product within," explains Johnson. "I love it—being open like that, it correctly offers the perception of freshness, suggesting

we aren't trying to hide anything."

The result has been a success for Treasure Mills, though Johnson did note that it did alter its packaging in September of 2010, when it reduced its size to an eight-pack to ensure customers had a chance to eat all the snacks before it expired.

"*School Safe* products are still baked goods, and as a result it has a short life, but, customers can extend that life by placing it in the freezer and taking them out as required," mentions Johnson. "You don't even have to thaw them, as they still maintain most of their softness and moistness even when eaten directly from the freezer."

According to Johnson, his company has not only managed to survive, but thrive, despite the onslaught of private-label competition that has entered the same school market.



Robert Johnson, President and CEO, **Treasure Mills Inc.**



Along with number one sellers *Banana Chocolate Chip Mini-loaf* and *Brownie Bars*, Treasure Mills also bakes and packages *School Safe* brands in tasty *Raspberry Banana Snack Cake*, *Chocolicious Cookie Bars* and the *Chocolate Chip Cookie Bar* varieties that are all available in major supermarket baked goods sections right across Canada and in the northeastern and southeastern U.S., including Texas.

The *School Safe* products are all healthy, nutritionally balanced, are low in sugar, low in fat and iron and each snack contains two grams of fiber, according to Johnson.

“And despite the fact that we have a fantastic product, I believe its success is due more to the brand,” Johnson reflects. “We have gone from being a seller of nut- and peanut-free baked goods to a company that has developed a brand that moves our product off the shelf—it looks and is fresh and new.”

Lending a big helping hand to Treasure Mills was **Cascades Inc.**, a Kingsey Falls, Que.-based globally-operating producer, converter and marketer of packaging and tissue products manufactured from recycled fibers.

“Cascades has been working with Treasure Mills since day one, but they have really outdone themselves with the recycled paperboard product they provided for our current packaging needs,” states Johnson. “It’s why they are my paperboard supplier.”

With four production lines available, Johnson says Treasure Mills runs a minimum of three lines during its 20-hour day, five- to six-day work-weeks, with each line always running something different: cookies on one line; muffin batter products on another; and two lines dedicated to *School Safe* products, as Johnson estimates that 90 per cent of the bakery’s business is driven by that brand.

“While we will do private labeling for anyone who asks, we will not offer our *School Safe* products in private labeling,” avers Johnson. “That would just be shooting ourselves in the foot.”

Along with multiple production lines, Treasure Mills utilizes a few different forms of packaging: clamshell for cookies; pails for batter or dough filling; and the Cascades paperboard boxes for *School Safe*.

One important piece of equipment effectively utilized by Treasure Mills, is a **Reiser Vemag** cookie depositor that divides the cookies dough into preformed molds, and is also used in the application of filling batter and pail lines.

Johnson says: “The Vemag is a versatile machine that can handle any type



A Consolidated Technologies cartoner opens the Cascades paperboard folding cartons and places the individually-wrapped *School Safe* snacks inside.



Cartons of *School Safe* nut- and peanut-free product pass through a Fortress Technology Phantom metal detection system to ensure optimal products safety.



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of doughs and batters with consistent accuracy and with minimal waste.

“I like it enough to say that we are in the process of purchasing a second Vemag for our lines.

After the *School Safe* product is baked and passed through a 20-minute blast freezer, it enters the packaging line.

Key to the line is a **Campbell Wrapper Corporation Heritage** horizontal flowwrapper—purchased in September of 2010—that has a top speed of 300 *upm* (units per minute).

To package the product individually, Treasure Mills uses film manufactured by **Vista-Pak Dakota Systems**, a Toronto fabricator of clear film packaging.

“It’s all in the service with Vista-Pak. I never run out of film, and I get excellent quality packaging for my *School Safe* products,” mentions Johnson.

Featuring a **Rockwell Automation Allen-Bradley**

PanelView Plus 700 control package, the all servo-driven *Heritage* wrapper is easy for Treasure Mills’ employees to use.

With a self-centering film roll, the *Heritage* can easily handle web widths of 20-, 24-, 28 and 32-inches with a wide range of films.

“It’s wonderful,” exclaims Johnson. “It’s a fully-automatic, no product- and no-bag operation that runs on a PLC (programmable logic controller) system that minimizes waste, making it fast and economical.”

Currently running the *Heritage* flow wrapper at 240-*upm*, Johnson admits he is not using the machine up to its full potential for now, but says things will change shortly once a new spiral freezer unit is set up that will allow Treasure Mills to ramp up the speed.

“And even though 300-*upm* is a good speed, ultimately I’m looking to amplify our output to over 1,000 *upm* when I can get in more equipment,” says Johnson.



Atlantic Packaging Products supplies Treasure Mills with all of its corrugated packaging cartons.

An Interpack Carton Sealer applies adhesive tape to seal the corrugated shipping cartons.

Once each baked product is individually flow-wrapped, it moves to a **Consolidated Technologies** cartoner that moves the product in groups of eight into the Cascades window paperboard package at speeds of 30- to 40-cartons per minute.

Utilizing a **Nordson Corporation ProBlue 7** hot-melt adhesive application system, the cartoner seals the boxes shut.

The cartons then pass through a **Fortress Technology Inc. Phantom** metal detection unit, and then off to a case-packer station, where 12 to 14 boxes are manually loaded into a corrugated carrier supplied by **Atlantic Packaging Products Ltd.** which then is run past an **Interpack Carton Sealers** case taper, placed onto a skid, and moved back into a freezer until ready for customer delivery.

Spurred on by the not-quite overnight success of *School Safe* baked products, Johnson says he is about to expand in to other food areas, mentioning celebration-type items like cakes.

“To be honest, if our customers hadn’t thought we offered a great bunch of products, and requested that we move into this new area, I might have had second thoughts,” mentions Johnson. “But I think that along with the way we have branded ourselves and our products, we’ll do alright.

“Kids love our products, and adults too,” exclaims Johnson. “Our *School Safe* products are fresh and as natural as they can be, while still meeting the nutritionally balanced requirements and still delivering an excellent taste and texture for the whole family.”

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