

Project:Food safety article - Pineridge Foods Inc.

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Interviews:Gourmet Baker: Dave MacPhail, Sophie Chan
Oakrun Farm Bakery: Tony Tristani, Rita Fajardo

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FOOD SAFETY

From food poisoning to product tampering, the food industry faces great risk every day. And as incidences of safety maintenance errors and violations grow, so too do the list of government regulations.

Businesses such as Gourmet Baker and Oakrun Farm Bakery have developed extensive quality assurance teams, policies, procedures and training practices over the years to ensure customer safety.

Operating under umbrella ownership by Pineridge Foods Inc. since 2007, Gourmet and Oakrun continue to monitor international government regulations, food industry best practices, and their own day-to-day operations to ensure absolute quality control in food safety. It's a natural fit with the Pineridge philosophy: "Do well by doing good".

Each company has a designated QA leader and team, and the general managers and senior operations/manufacturing staff are heavily involved in QA process maintenance and development. Under Pineridge ownership, the groups now work closely together to mine best practices from each other's businesses and to collaborate on even more effective new approaches.

Dave MacPhail is Vice President and General Manager and Sophie Chan is Quality Assurance and Regulatory Affairs Manager for Gourmet Baker, located in Vancouver, British Columbia with plants in Vancouver and Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Gourmet's QA program is based on the strengths of programs developed by prior multinational owners. The bakery effectively made the jump from extensive national QA support to the creation of its own innovative team of seven, a feat of which Dave and Sophie are decidedly proud.

Over the years Gourmet's QA initiatives have covered everything from new fencing and security procedures around the plants to the development of employee training within the plants.

Dave and Sophie keep continual watch for new government initiatives in quality control, and they also study their in-store retail, food service and restaurant customers for new and improved practices.

"The perception is that food safety may not be as big an issue in bakery because it's not dairy or meat," says Sophie. "Food safety is food safety. The programs need to be in place, it should be a top priority for your company."

Gourmet follows strict quality control processes for each of its products. The lines are cleaned with every shift changeover to avoid contamination, including allergens.

The bakery also tracks products stringently. Dave cites the laminated dough created in the Vancouver plant as an example: "We test the loaves and retain samples for each run on everything that is run."

So when Loblaws had an issue with cinnamon buns on a line in Orillia, Ontario, Gourmet was able to track the product down to the specific line and to the people working the line and recall the product within an hour.

"Our raison d'être is we will not compromise quality," says Dave. "If we change for [costs or customer specifications], our QA people are involved. When we develop a product, QA have a whole program."

"Food safety is interwoven through all aspects of our business. We have very few customer complaints. We do a monthly post-mortem, we're buttoned down. Wherever there's a key learning we sharpen it right away. Our motto is superior quality at a fair price. Food safety is at the top of the list."

Gourmet has Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) accreditation, and because of its broad North American market, the company also is validated by Customs-Trade Partnership Against Terrorism (C-TPAT), which involves annual inspections and approvals through U.S. Customs and Border Protection, part of the Department of Homeland Security.

Gourmet also ensures that it is in compliance with offshore vendor programs, and has had to reformulate products to accommodate that. The company has achieved

the highest, or “superior”, level of achievement with the American Institute of Baking (AIB) for more than three consecutive years in all three plants.

Tony Tristani, Senior Vice President and General Manager for Oakrun Bakery Farm, and Rita Fajardo, Quality Assurance Manager at Oakrun, form another tight-knit team in food safety leadership.

Their QA journey has been markedly different from that of Dave and Sophie. Oakrun started life as a family business on the hobby farm run by John Voortman in Ancaster, Ontario.

As a family-run business, Oakrun didn't benefit from established multinational QA programs. Instead, the company took advantage of another source of experience.

“We knew we had to get into food safety in a big way 15 years ago,” says Tony. “We looked at who would be the best firm to help us manage that.” Oakrun turned to Guelph Food Technology Centre (GFTC), a not-for-profit, non-subsidized firm that provides consulting, technology, training and auditing services to the Canadian agri-food industry.

“We used them to help us with developing our program,” says Tony. “From there we worked with the government and used the government's protocols for HACCP etc.”

One of Rita's seven QA team members includes a HACCP coordinator who helps Oakrun maintain HACCP standards, even though the company is not yet certified. Oakrun would have its certification by now had it not been for a major fire in a critical building in September 2007.

The lines for Oakrun's “world-famous” English muffins and crumpets were destroyed in the fire, a devastating blow to sales and potentially to customer retention. Having sold to Pineridge five months earlier, Oakrun now had the resources to restructure and rebuild.

They made space and created new lines in an existing building, carefully choosing and inspecting the replacement equipment under QA controls. Tony expects that reconstruction of the original structure will be completed this year. They'll apply for HACCP certification the following year, and they expect to get it.

“We have a lot of pride in being able to bounce back as quickly as we did,” says Rita. “We had to make a lot of modifications to the facility to make sure of food

safety. Everybody's commitment to making sure that happened was amazing." Oakrun employees were continually bringing new ideas and areas of concern to Rita's attention to help ensure quality control.

"You realize all the training over the years has paid off. It shows that people understand the concept of food safety and take it to heart."

"Food safety is obviously a huge priority for us," says Tony. "Our policies are living, breathing documents. All our employees are trained on them to the degree needed [for their roles]. "We're always revising them, it's very systematic, we make sure we gauge everything on them."

Oakrun also expects to begin work again with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. OMAFRA had chosen the bakery as a guinea pig for new processes that will eventually become mandatory, and the pilot had already begun when the fire occurred.

"We were scheduled to be the first facility to be audited under that pilot plant program," says Tony. "Top to bottom, every employee was excited. We had excellent momentum. The fire presented its own challenges."

The QA leaders at Gourmet and Oakrun agree that the connection of the two bakeries under Pineridge ownership has been beneficial in QA as well as other areas.

"We're constantly in contact – if they have a really good program, we'll look at it and ask, 'Is that something we can amalgamate?'" says Rita.

"We're getting more and more integrated as a group and thinking more like 'Pineridge' bakeries, because there is a lot of talent in the pool," adds Tony.

Gourmet and Oakrun now hold joint QA team conference calls, and the companies are working on a Pineridge sustainability initiative that began with their sister company in Pineridge's dairy platform, Liberté Brand Products of Montréal.

"We're the test pilot for the baking group," says Dave. "We're doing lifecycle analysis now and we've done the benchmarking data." Oakrun will then adopt and adapt the finished product for its own practices. Food safety will be a key part of the program.

"You have to look at your food safety system from a global standpoint," says Rita. "You have to measure up not only in Canada, but in the world."