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LAST OF THREE-PART SERIES / HIRZEL FARMING & CANNING



Tomatoes being sorted at Hirzel Canning in Pemberville

Hirzel tomatoes **Ripe** for business

Tomato season brings an added hustle around the Hirzel Canning Company processing plant in Pemberville.

Truckloads of tomatoes, fresh from nearby fields are unloaded and transformed within hours of being picked into various products ready to be placed on store shelves. In fact, around 25 truckloads of the field-ripened tomatoes are processed each day during the season which lasts from late August until early October.

The Pemberville operation, at various times, will produce 52 or more different products. Preparation ranges from tomato juice and tomato soup to a variety of tomato products including whole, crushed, stewed and diced tomatoes, as well as tomato paste, to name a few.

The Dei Fratelli brand of products also includes at least nine different pasta sauces, seven different salsas; and various other related products.

Once the tomatoes arrive they are unloaded and graded. The trucks are filled with water which flushes out the tomatoes into a trough where



Steve Hirzel (left) with George Lloyd at Northwood plant

any field soils are washed away. It takes approximately 20 minutes to unload the average truck.

The flushing method used minimizes damage to the tomatoes and expedites processing.

According to Jessica Hirzel, the tomatoes will go through three separate water changes to assure cleanliness.

After the initial grading as they are being unloaded, the tomatoes

will be further checked and sorted by employees to determine the best tomatoes to be used for the whole and diced products. Other quality tomatoes are used for the various sauces. Substandard tomatoes are sorted out and composted for future use in the fields.

The good tomatoes continue their journey through the plant by going through a "chemical peel." Hot water is used to separate the skin

from the tomato, and tumblers remove the skins.

Depending on the product being made, the tomatoes can either be cooked raw or later cooked after being canned. Those being cooked before processing are cooked quickly under a vacuum to help preserve the flavor.

The vacuum process also uses less energy. The water used to cook them is later recycled and used for washing other tomatoes from the fields.

Once cooked, again, depending on the product being made, onion, garlic and other seasonings are added based on specific recipes. Every batch has a specific recipe to be followed. The products are cooked at the rate of 100 gallons per minute under the watchful eye of product experts.

Once each product is done, samples are taken to the in-house lab for inspection. The products are checked for quality, taste, as well as chemical and other safety checks. (See HIRZEL on 2)

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Hirzel

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In addition, each product is tracked along the way. After a product is in the can or jar, the company can trace the roots of that product back to the exact field where the tomatoes were grown.

Within the processing plant there can be up to six different products being processed and canned simultaneously on the various production lines.

On any given day, the company will process up to eight truckloads of empty cans. To the untrained eye, the steady stream of tomatoes with employees

tossing them from one area to another, the fork lifts zipping around moving both empty and full cans, the production lines with products being created and packaged, looks chaotic.

In reality, it is a well-orchestrated, closely-managed, and highly-perfected operation. From start to finish, the Hirzel family operations oversee every step of the process which starts with the company's own tomato seedlings in their greenhouses and ends with a line of products which has been pleasing local families in their houses for years.

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