

## **Farming-Processing family finds new ways to compete**

*The Thomas family of Essex uses innovation and alliances to survive as a small tomato processor.*

By Jeffrey Carter

### **SPECIAL to the Ontario Farmer**

An air of anticipation surrounds Bill Thomas as he points out features of his family's newest investments. Two processing units will allow for continuous processing at the Thomas Canning (Maidstone) Ltd. Plant in Essex County.

"As you grow and production changes you need something different," Thomas says.

"We're under such pressures from retailers for efficiencies that we have to decide at some point if we want to be more competitive... You're not going to get it out of the retail sector. You've got to get internally."

That's been the challenge for one of the remaining eight Ontario tomato canners. But Thomas Canning continues to change for the future.

The latest innovation is moving two new processing lines away from the old batch approach to continuous flow.

It required about two hours of cooking time and a half hour of cooling time to heat process their canned whole tomatoes and tomato juice with the old retort units. Canned products were hand-loaded into baskets which were lowered into tanks filled with boiling water and then moved through another tank filled with cool water.

The retort method is not obsolete, Thomas explains. However, the two new processing units will reduce labour costs, reduce the cooking/cooling time and may even improve quality.

Finishing touches were just being made to the first of the two units installed just before this year's tomato run. It will handle the 100 oz. commercial cans. A second unit will handle both the 28 and 19 oz. cans.

As the cans move along conveyors, steam raises the internal temperature of the cans to 190 degrees Fahrenheit. The cans are gently rolled so the product inside is agitated, reducing the time it takes for total product heating.

Steam processing is followed up by a continuous spray bath. Around 80 commercial-sized cans and 400 of the smaller cans can be processed every minute.

Santiago Arcaraz is overseeing the installation of the processing units. He's the sales manager for Food Processing and Packaging Machinery Inc., headquartered in Columbia,

South Carolina. The parent company, Maquinaria Jersa of Mexico City, has a full line of food processing equipment.

There are only 12 other Jersa units cooking-cooling units in the world and this is the first north of the US/Mexico border. Thomas investigated similar Italian technology but said the unit costs were much higher.

“For tomatoes, this is the best equipment because of the compact design, because it’s a continuous system, and because of the reliability,” Arcaraz says.

Thomas hopes everything will run smoothly. The old lines have been maintained this year in the event there are problems to be worked out with the two new lines. When the harvest starts, there’s no time for shutdowns, he explains.

“These machines are more efficient. It’s not just about sustainability in the field. The processor has to be accountable too...I don’t have volume but I can be more efficient in some areas,” Thomas says.

The new equipment is just part of the drive toward competitiveness for Thomas Canning. The company has launched a quality assurance program that will eventually allow consumers to trace product right back to the field it was grown.

Thomas Canning, which owns the Utopia label, is a Canadian leader in this approach, Thomas says. He says a certain percentage of customers want to be assured that the products they eat is of the highest quality and was grown and processed in an environmentally sustainable manner. A soon-to-be-launched website will provide details of the program.

The effort helps differentiate product produced by Thomas Canning from that of its competitors. The company is also the only tomato processor in Canada with an organic tomato product line.

Thomas Canning is owned and operated by Bill Thomas and his brother Bob and their cousin Jack Thomas. The company was founded by their grandfather William in 1932.

“Of course that was in the middle of the depression and everyone was looking for some way to make a bit of income,” says Bill Thomas.

The Thomas family were farmers and at that time decided that adding value made sense.

They continue to farm about 400 acres, on clay soil, but grow few tomatoes themselves, preferring to contract tomato acreage.

When machine picking arrived, tomato growers on clay soils were at a disadvantage to those on lighter soils, so the Thomas family went buying from other farmers.

In the 1930's tomato producers sold to the fresh market, in Windsor.

It was thought that if some of the product were processed, the year's income could be spread out.

So small tomato processors sprung up all over Essex County. Farmers would then get together and pool their cans and send them in a batch to Toronto.

Now the industry is global. Thomas says he has good cooperation from other large canners like Heinz and Kraft, because in reality, their competition is now California.

Ontario produces about a half million tonnes of tomatoes per year, while California is between 10 and 12 million tonnes per year.

Thomas, a member of the current class of the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program, says the evolution of the family processor has been the same as the family farm. As technology has improved, the businesses have had to grow, or become unsustainable.

Ontario is competitive in technology, but more of a challenge in volume of tomatoes, says Thomas.

However, he says the low dollar helps to make them competitive.

Thomas has growers in Lambton, Essex and Kent counties, and says he has no more interest than he needs from growers interested in contracts.

The tomato harvest is more than a week late, but crop quality looks very good, says Thomas, despite an early frost which wiped out many tomatoes in the area.

However, late planting means that the industry needs frost-free weather well into October.