

Custom Pack and Air Products Our work together



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Danna LeBlanc, Air Products Account Manager



No small feat: Air Products helps shrimp processor realize big growth with advanced cryogenics

In a small, coastal Mississippi icehouse three generations ago, Lee Gutierrez started the Biloxi Freezing Company in 1947. Little did he know that he was laying the groundwork for what is now Custom Pack—one of the industry leaders in seafood processing.

The successful business now processes over 15 million pounds of shrimp a year. Custom Pack primarily packages shrimp for other vendors, usually sales or brokerage outlets that handle large retail accounts, like grocery stores. Custom Pack has worked with most of the grocery chains in the United States throughout its history, including retail giant Wal-Mart.



At one time, shrimp was a luxury item supplied primarily from natural populations. But prices declined when large quantities of farm-raised imported shrimp flooded the market, allowing shrimp to become the top non-canned seafood commodity. Due to overseas competitors with access to relatively inexpensive production of large quantities of shrimp, Custom Pack has constantly needed to adapt its operations to incorporate innovative technologies and help maintain its competitiveness and profitability.

Volatile, ultra-competitive conditions in the industry caused many producers to close. But Custom Pack has more than stayed afloat—it has prospered. Clay Gutierrez, Lee's grandson, attributes this to the company's ability to stay ahead of competitors—both domestic and overseas. "By being flexible, we have been able to become innovators in the industry," he says. "We're usually the first to try new technologies, which helps us keep our competitive edge and maintain our market share."

Time and time again, Custom Pack has turned to Air Products. And Air Products has delivered.

Pioneers in shrimp-freezing

In the early days, seafood products were canned to preserve them for the retail market. Custom Pack led the industry by switching from canning to freezing technologies using a mechanical brine freezer. Always on the lookout for ways to enhance the quality of their products, the company opted for a straight tunnel freezer cooled with a cryogen. Ultimately a cryogenic spiral freezer using CO₂ was chosen. As business grew, Custom Pack required up to three truckloads per day of CO₂ to maintain processing capacity, leading the company to replace that technology with a conventional ammonia-based mechanical freezer.

With the growing popularity of peeled shrimp, Custom Pack returned to cryogenic freezing, which is particularly well-suited for processing this wet, fleshy product. After careful assessment and evaluation, Air Products helped Custom Pack install a Freshline® immersion freezer to produce IQF (individually quick frozen) shrimp. The benefits to Custom Pack included better handling, an increased yield and decreased dehydration, preservation of product integrity, and improved operability of downstream equipment like bagging equipment. These enhancements to the operation enabled production capacity to increase from 5000 lb/hr to 8000 lb/hr.



Keeping shrimp separated is important because the market has demanded smaller and smaller portions. Traditionally, shrimp were shipped in large blocks and distributed to consumers through seafood counters. This resulted in lots of waste if a retailer did not sell all the shrimp that was in a block. Additionally, in the retail business, grocery stores incur overhead costs for training and staffing the seafood counters. Custom Pack responded by offering IQF shrimp in five-pound bags. Over time, the size has slowly decreased to as small as eight-ounce packs. By offering shrimp in small packets, grocery stores can put the shrimp on a shelf, conveniently accessible to consumers, and reduce waste.

With Air Products' help, Custom Pack solidified its market leadership position. Having the ability to offer IQF shrimp helped Custom Pack gain a competitive edge in a marketplace that was rapidly becoming saturated with imported shrimp. Since most offshore shrimp producers did not have access to IQF technology, Custom Pack was able to offer a unique product line that its competitors could not.



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Cutting-edge technology and convenience

Eventually, the overseas producers caught up to their rivals and acquired IQF cryogenic freezing technologies. To remain competitive, Custom Pack sought other means to trailblaze in the seafood industry. Building on the trend toward consumer convenience, Custom Pack looked at one of the fastest-growing retail segments: meal kits, which contain all of the components of a meal, separately packaged, in a single, easy-to-prepare kit. Custom Pack, keeping with its legacy of innovation, partnered with Seacoast Seafoods and developed the first meal kit to hit the market under the Chef's Choice label.

Although meal kits are convenient, they were not originally designed for small portions. To overcome this issue, Air Products Account Manager Danna LeBlanc introduced Gutierrez to the Freshline® tumbler, which helps processors create convenient and portionable meals by equally enrobing individual pieces of food with sauce during the IQF process. The result is a meal that can be as portioned as the consumer desires.

"Custom Pack is open to new ideas, which gives them an edge over its competitors. Because Custom Pack is an expanding business, I thought it would be the perfect place to install the first Freshline tumbler system in the United States," says LeBlanc. "That's the approach we take with our customers. We develop solutions together to help them run their operations more efficiently. It's about teamwork."

The Freshline Tumbler gives Custom Pack the ability to capitalize on the demand for easily prepared, high-quality convenience food.

Custom Pack hopes to use the Freshline tumbler to carve a niche in the prepared meals market and expand its customer base to retain the margins and market share that its competitors seek. Expanded product lines with a variety of sauces are easy to introduce with the tumbler. And the programmable recipe controller allows users to easily change product lines. The Freshline tumbler helps provide Custom Pack the added advantages of better product presentation and a more user-friendly, convenient alternative to the current meal kit products. Since the sauce distribution is even and the products are IQF, meals are portionable and taste is uniform. Additionally, the tumbler helps to protect Custom Pack from overseas competition because the product recipes are proprietary.



“The tumbler allows us to expand our product line while only adding one step,” says Gutierrez. “We are now the first processor in the position to approach our customers with this new offering and develop additional products for them. In addition, we can reach new market segments.”

Custom Pack has found two large market segments for Freshline tumbler technology: food service and retail sectors. For the food service provider, enrobed IQF food can provide labor savings and consistency while maintaining food quality. For the retail consumer, tumbler-processed products deliver unmatched convenience, ease of preparation, and taste.

Custom Pack has been testing products and exploring several product lines since installing the Freshline tumbler and has collaborated closely with Air Products during the installation and start-up of the system.

“We conducted the first test for Custom Pack, and then additional tests later for certain products that Custom Pack is developing to help determine production parameters for new products,” says LeBlanc. “Our food specialists have provided their expertise to Custom Pack, which has been a major help during development efforts.”

During the early stages of start-up, Air Products’ Commercial Technology Group was instrumental. Since the tumbler technology was not familiar to the Custom Pack operations team, they relied on the specialists in Commercial Technology for training and assistance in getting the equipment up and running.

Eric Bender, an Air Products food industry lab technician, recently attended on-site testing of a new product to ensure the machine operated smoothly. And Air Products will continue to support Custom Pack in its efforts to develop markets for next-generation convenience products and provide the technical support Custom Pack needs to maintain operations.

“Air Products has done a great job making sure everything works smoothly. They have been really responsive and helpful throughout the start-up process. The machinery works well and produces a high-quality product,” Gutierrez says.

Continual opportunity through collaboration

Grocery chains are demanding increased shelf life. To meet the demands, Custom Pack, with the help and expertise of Air Products, is exploring the use of modified atmosphere packaging (MAP) technologies to extend shelf life and preserve freshness. Custom Pack currently uses chemical methods on some of its product lines to achieve the same result.

Air Products and Custom Pack have been partners in innovation throughout their relationship. Through its relationship with Air Products, Custom Pack has become the industry leader in new seafood processing technology. By continuously adopting next-generation technology, Custom Pack has managed to prosper in an increasingly commoditized industry.

Custom Pack's pioneering spirit, coupled with Air Products' breakthrough technology and support, has allowed the seafood processing company to remain successful when many other domestic processing companies have struggled or closed.



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