

Irregular choices

the **filling** business

Spanish fish packer Conservas del Noroeste is canning irregular cans at higher speeds, reports Tom Woerndl

Canned seafood is the fastest growing sector of the global canned food market, which according to a recent report by Euromonitor has annual sales of around US\$77 billion.

One reason for this growth is the burgeoning appetite for canned fish from consumers – in particular species that contain omega-3 fatty acids – as well as improvements to sustainable fishing practices, and the growth of value-added products in the sector.

A company that's riding the wave of canned seafood growth is Vigo, Spain-based fish packer Connorsa, which cans a number of seafood brands – including its flagship Cabo de Peñas label – at the Conservas del Noroeste fish cannery.

The company, which has a turnover of €57 million (US\$77m), uses a seaming system from Spanish canning machinery supplier MCG to close its range of irregular cans at the Vigo site.

“We use a number of irregular can shapes, which is key to our branding,” explains Jaime Silva, production manager at the cannery. “Finding machines that are able to seam a range of irregular cans at medium to high speed was a real challenge for us.

“But the system we recently installed from MCG allows us to achieve our goals, with minimal downtime for stoppages or can format changeovers.”

Established in 1985, the Conservas del Noroeste fish cannery currently ranks as one of the top ten – in terms of output – in Spain, and employs around 230.

The facility produces between 80m and

100m cans a year, packaging a range of fish and shellfish products, including tuna, mackerel, mussels and clams into cans, as well as some output in glass containers and pouches.

“In total, we fill about 110 SKUs [stock keeping units] at the site, including product ranges such as Blue Line and Golden & Selection,” adds Silva. “We are also one of the few canneries that are certified as BIO [organic], and offer a wide range of BIO products.”



Cans of products from Conservas del Noroeste are individually packed in cardboard boxes

Although the company cans a range of fish species, shellfish products are amongst its most popular brands, with Connorsa sourcing its metal packaging at the site from Mivisa and Crown.

“Mivisa is our main supplier,” says Silva, “and we use both tinfoil and aluminium cans in round, oval and rectangular format.”

For packaging irregular cans, Connorsa uses a F640 seaming machine from fellow



Spanish company MCG, located about a 30 minute drive south in Pontevedra. The unit was delivered in January this year and is currently processing Club RR90 and RR125 cans.

“The machine was commissioned very quickly in around one week,” says Silva. “A key challenge during the installation phase was the incorporation of an accumulation system to correctly feed the machine.

“Currently, the unit is running at a restricted maximum speed of 300cpm, because of the limitations of our post-fill accumulation and feeding systems. However, in the near future we will be able to run the machine at 350cpm over a two-shift pattern with no problems.”

According to Silva, the key benefits of the canning system include automatic height adjustment, speed and safety. “The precise nature of the automatic height adjustment feature not only gives us a huge amount of flexibility, but also saves considerable time that would be spent manually adjusting the machine for can size changes,” he notes. “This function allows extremely fast changeovers and is a big advantage for us.”

José Luis Ruiz, general manager at MCG, agrees that the height adjustment feature is a key advantage, claiming that



Fish canner Conservas del Noroeste, which is based at Vigo, uses machines from MCG to package irregular can formats

Below: The entrance of the F640 seaming machine supplied by MCG



the system is accurate to 0.1mm.

“The precision height elevation system moves at the same time as clinching,” explains Ruiz. “This feature, as well as the end feed and seaming pulleys, are exclusive to MCG machines. As such, canning operations are able to automatically change to a different can height in three minutes.

“In addition, with harder tinplate currently on the market, seaming pulleys with independent settings for each second operation allow consistent can closing.”

The high speed of the machine has allowed the Conservas del Noroeste cannery to reallocate some of its floor space that was being used by slower seaming

units. “By having a dedicated and reliable seaming system for irregular cans, we are able to reduce the number of overall machines we operate at the facility,” confirms Silva.

Often a challenge when filling seafood products with added brine or oil, spillage is additionally said to be minimised by the MCG system, although Silva says he is yet to realise this benefit.

“Because we currently overfill our products we have not seen this,” he notes. “However, in the future we look forward to be able to benefit from this feature of the machine.”

MCG claims that, having completely

redesigned the F640 unit, it is now able to offer its customers less spillage compared to lower speeds seaming units. “This is a completely new machine – not just another version of an existing model,” explains Ruiz. “The fact that canneries are embracing this technology is borne out by the 30 or more units we have installed over the past three years.

“Other features, such as the completely stainless steel construction, a tangential design, and water-tight base plate, mean that the top speed of this machine is 60 to 70 percent faster than any other irregular can seamer currently on the market.

“The base plate design, in particular, allows companies to realise considerably lower maintenance bills over the years and maintain seaming parameters for longer periods.”

Another key design advantage is said to be the reliability of the machine, with Silva confirming that he has not experienced any significant breakdowns or products jams since installation.

“Overall the machine has fully met our expectations,” he explains. “The system is maintaining key seaming parameters, even at high speeds, and we have had no significant line stoppages or product jams.”

The hygiene of the machine is also said to be of a high standard thanks to its stainless steel construction. “No elements inside the machine are treated with nickel-based surface treatments, which means high sanitary conditions at a low cost,” adds Ruiz.

In fact, the success of the machine is such that Silva expects to slowly replace his older irregular can seaming units with newer systems from MCG. “In view of our experience with the F640 seamer, one of our future projects will be the gradual renewal of our existing irregular seamers,” he says.

In terms of MCG’s overall sales for the year, Ruiz says that “2013 has been a strange one in that many investment projects have been postponed into 2014”.

“Our main markets in 2013 have been Poland and Russia, where we have been supplying our heavy duty round can seamers [R645 model], which have outputs of up to 450cpm. The larger irregular can seaming units, F640 and F425, have also been supplied to the European and South American markets.

“At present we look forward to a promising start to the New Year and have a lot of interest in our machines, particularly the F640 and F425 models for irregular cans and R430 system for round cans.”

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