

Casebook

Milled herbs give shelf-stable pesto a fresh look

Christopher Ranch, a major international agri-business concern, is best known as a leading producer of quality fresh garlic in the United States. The company grows and imports a variety of fruits and vegetables including red, white and yellow onions, broccoli and cauliflower, yellow and white sweet corn, and green and red bell peppers. Located in Gilroy, Calif., the garlic capital of the world, the company grows, harvests and packs 22 million pounds of garlic per year under several of its own labels including Festival and Chef's Choice.

Chopped and crushed garlic

The company has also expanded its product offering to include chopped and crushed garlic. The company's new processing facilities produce fresh garlic in ready-to-use form for retail sale in convenient 4.25 and 9 oz. jars. The combination of Christopher Ranch's processing capabilities, and access to "just picked" vegetable ingredients, provided the company with a unique opportunity to produce another specialty product—pesto. Pesto is an Italian sauce of fresh ground basil and parsley, mixed with garlic and olive oil, used over pasta dishes. Christopher Ranch's pesto is unique in that it is shelf-stable. It is a natural extension of the company's traditional product line.

Shelf-stable pesto

Pesto is currently sold through brokers to the produce departments of several large food store chains, along with the chopped and crushed garlic products, and other vegetable items. Since the product is one of the few shelf-stable pestos in the country, Christopher Ranch is pursuing sales for the specialty product in delis, the foodservice industry, specialty stores and mail order firms.

Christopher Ranch uses a variety of fresh ingredients

in making its pesto product including fresh basil, parsley and garlic. Fresh garlic is delivered already cracked in the form of individual cloves. The garlic is loaded onto an elevator, conveyed to a mechanical peeling process, and discharged onto an inspection belt. Peeled garlic travels up an inclined conveyor and is uniformly diced into 1/8-in. cubes on an Urschel Model RA-A Dicer.

Fresh basil and parsley are harvested daily from outlying fields, and loaded onto a custom-built prep table. The table is equipped with an overhead fresh water spray and four sorting stations. Individual products are sprayed and cleaned, loaded into a centrifuge, and spun dry. Each product is unloaded with an overhead hoist and processed on the same line as the garlic (with the exception of the size reduction stage).

The final particle size of the basil and parsley is critical to the overall appearance of the pesto. Initial tests were run with a hammer mill which produced a soupy paste with non-distinct particle size. Now, Christopher Ranch reduces basil and parsley on an Urschel milling machine that cuts the product into a predetermined size and shape.

Precise control of particle size

"The Comitrol Processor gave us the particle size and shape that we needed in our pesto product," says Jim Wallace, production engineer.

Comitrol Processor milling machines are single-pass units that process a product into a distinct particle size ranging from chunks to purees. The Comitrol line consists of six models with various capacities.

The milled basil and parsley are fed into kettles where virgin olive oil and other ingredients are added via a batch controller. California granulated almonds are added, and the mix is put into cookers where it is pasteurized to 185°F in 2,000 lb. batches. The pesto is cooked with steam, transferred to a cooling kettle and chilled to a lower filling temperature. Pesto is filled on a

glass packaging line and packed in jars of 4-1/4, 8 and 32 oz.

The Christopher family has been farming the land in Gilroy since the 1880s, when Ole Christopher emigrated from Denmark to the Santa Clara Valley. Today, a fourth generation of Christophers is active in the company overseeing 1,700 acres of row crops, and supervising hundreds of highly qualified employees. His worldwide network sells, packs, ships, imports, and exports fresh and value-added produce.

Processing has added a new dimension to the \$25 million enterprise, and demand for the pesto product has met with instant success.

Urschel Laboratories, based in Valparaiso, Ind., is a supplier of more than 40 different size reduction machines. The advanced food cutting principles developed by the company offer distinct advantages over previously used methods of slicing, dicing, and shredding food products.



Fresh basil and parsley is run through an Urschel milling machine that cuts the product into a specific particle size, a benefit noted by Jim Wallace, Christopher Ranch production engineer.