

journal sentinel

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

A business built on corn and peas: Lodi Canning Co. preserves a century-old tradition

Bill Glauber, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 6:00 a.m. CT Oct. 29, 2019 | Updated 8:43 a.m. CT Oct. 29, 2019



LODI - At the Lodi Canning Co., they know a thing or two about Wisconsin corn. Trucked, husked, washed, sorted, cooked and canned, another bounty of corn has made its way through the family-owned firm that was founded in 1917.



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Frommung monitors cream style corn just before it is sealed and cooked for 175 minutes at 242 degrees at the Lodi Canning Co. (Photo: Mark Hoffman / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

Bob Goeres, following in the footsteps of his grandfather and father, runs the business, dealing with customers, contracting with growers, hiring workers and testing the product at a plant that runs 24/7 during growing season.

June and July mark the height of the pea season. From August through September, and often into October, it's all corn, all the time.

The last of this year's corn harvest was canned on Oct. 15.

But the work goes on to prepare for next year.

"I try to pass this place off as a health spa," Goeres joked recently as he took a pair of visitors through the factory, where in the height of the season workers watch over the product and steam rises from huge cookers.



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Company President Bob Goeres moves a basket filled with 107-ounce cans of cream style corn to a machine that will agitate the cans so they will cool more evenly at Lodi Canning Co. (Photo: Mark Hoffman / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

The canning operation is a mix of machines from the mid-20th century to the 21st century, from an old tractor used to push the corn into the facility to a state-of-the-art electronic color sorter.

There are cutters, washers, metal detectors, cookers, agitators and labeling machines.

It's clear that Goeres takes pride in the workers, the factory and the product, keeping alive a slice of Wisconsin commerce.

The Lodi Canning Co. bills itself as the only single-plant privately owned cannery in Wisconsin. It's a throwback to another time.

T.O. Goeres, a dentist, was among 20 local citizens to invest in the company in 1917. He became the firm's first president and ran the company for 54 years before his son Ted took over.

Ted Goeres, 94, helped grow the company and still serves as chairman of the board.

For Bob Goeres, now 61, the canning business is all he has ever known. Warehouses where he once played as a child are filled with cans of peas and corn bound for professional kitchens across the country.

You won't find the product on the shelves of your neighborhood supermarket.

The #10 cans are bulk-sized — 107 ounces — and sold under private labels.

Goeres has retained his passion for the work. And he's helping to guide another generation of his family in the business. His 26-year-old son, Devin, works in the factory, learning the business from the ground up on the production side.



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Willy Kutz uses circa 1950 Case tractor with a hand-operated clutch to push corn onto a conveyor where it starts its journey into become a canned cream styles corn. (Photo: Mark Hoffman / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

The firm has 24 full-time employees but the staff expands dramatically during the canning season.

There are around 100 seasonal workers when the pea harvest comes in and 70 for the corn harvest. The crops are all grown within 25 miles of the firm.

In the old days, the seasonal workers lived close by the canning company, high school and college students looking for summer work and homemakers boosting the income of their families.

An early-morning steam horn would sound through the town, letting people know a shift was about to begin, Goeres said.



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Canned corn is moved to a warehouse at the Lodi Canning Company in Lodi. The third-generation family-owned business is the only single-plant, privately owned cannery remaining in Wisconsin. The firm's specialty is cream style corn. (Photo: Mark Hoffman / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

Now, most of the seasonal workers commute into town.

Pay for seasonal workers begins at \$15 an hour, with double-time wages on Sundays and holidays.

The firm's niche is canned cream-style corn, made from corn kernels, water, sugar, salt and a starch slurry that acts as a thickening agent.

Maybe it's not trendy, but canned creamed corn works well in large kitchens and holds up on steam tables.

"People do still eat creamed corn," Goeres said.

But the canned pea business is tougher, with stiff competition from frozen peas.

Over the years, Goeres has handled the ups and downs of the business. He pays close attention to quality, grading the product daily.

He has sampled quite a few vegetables in his time.

"I eat cream corn and peas for breakfast," he said. "You look for consistency. We want every can of cream corn to look the same."