



**ESSEX COUNTY IN THE PARK
INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCY**

Church Street P.O. Box 217 Elizabethtown, NY 12932
518.873.9114 Fax: 873.2011 E-Mail: info@essexcountyida.com
Web site: www.essexcountyida.com

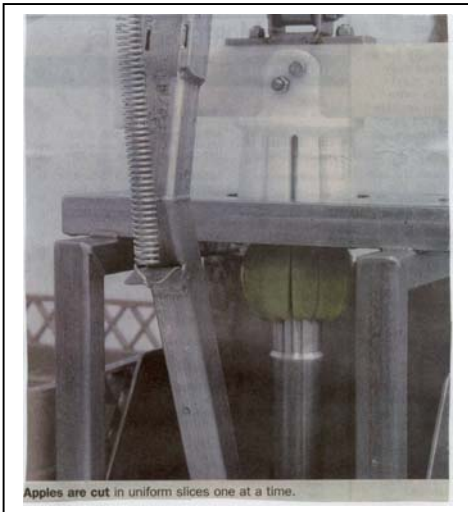
Press Republican
Sunday, August 29, 2004

Making The Cut
By: Kim Dedam



A team of technicians at Champlain Valley Specialty's new Fresh-Cut operation, put together individual-sized fresh fruit containers with oranges, pineapple, and grapes. The food industry demand for fresh-sliced fruit products is on the rise. PHOTO BY KIM DEDAM

Local venture aims to take slice out of fruit industry



Apples are cut in uniform slices one at a time.

On the other side of farm fences is a hungry population. Regional fruit growers tap into diverse markets to sell and distribute the ripe harvest they gather every year. One regional entrepreneur has made a unique entrance into a new arena that is in demand these days.

Champlain Valley Specialty in Keeseville refit its production last April in response to a growing call for cut fruit, said



Jeremy Dygert, whose father, Jerry, has been involved in farming markets since 1988. The Dygerts' new venture, Fresh Cuts, has been operational for just over a month. Already, two new innovative products are on the horizon. And Fresh Cuts is one of only two apple-slicing facilities in New York State.

Schools, grocery chains and restaurants have noticed that bite-sized fruits are popular as a healthy alternative to snack foods, Jerry explained.

"One of the biggest topics that comes up (with buyers) is sliced apples," Jeremy said. "It has become a request in the industry."

"How many times have you packed an apple in a lunch box and found it with just a few bites taken out of it?" Jeremy asked.

"We even see it here when we have a tray of sliced apples out in the lunch room," he added. "They're usually gone by early afternoon."

The Dygerts work long hours together in their stainless-steel, state-of-the-art Fresh Cut operation. And like farmers everywhere, the routine is well ordered.

From the exterior, the processing plant resembles an average Adirondack barn. But inside, the environment is white, carefully chilled, sanitized and organized around bays filled with fresh produce.

A central sterile room is kept a constant 45 degrees Fahrenheit. New overhead sprayers and several apple baths are strategically placed at pass-through windows from one side of the fruit line to another.

Apples are sliced on one side of the room. Cantaloupe, honeydew and pineapple are cut for fresh-fruit bowls on the other.

In a cold room left of the central area, Ellie Dygert, Jeremy's mom, removed labels from Granny Smith apples bought from California growers. She worked carefully with rubber gloves and set each in a vat of cold water.

In a room right off the cutting area, other family members pulled pallets loaded with boxed fruit out to the loading dock.

Cutting fruit individually is a tried-and true method of quality control, Jeremy said.

Slicing reveals what is inside, and people are not always enticed by holes or rotten sections.

Fresh Cut's apples are individually placed on a hand-pulled slicer.

"This way, we can visually review every fruit as we go," Jeremy said.

"And we don't peel our apples, since the skin has many valuable nutrients."

Apple slices are sorted on the stainless-steel table, and any that have imperfections are sent to holding baskets underneath. They will be composted on hayfields that belong to neighboring farmers.

"We can cut 400-500 pounds of fruit per hour," Jeremy said.



After they are sliced and sorted, apples will be soaked in Vitamin C and then dried. This helps slow the aging process and keeps the slices crisp.

The apple slices are then rinsed in a vitamin bath. The anti-oxidizing process is sort of the same as adding lemon juice to apple-pie filling so the apples won't brown quickly.

"The vitamin C bath helps slow the aging process. It also keeps the slices crisp," Jeremy explained. "Their refrigerated shelf life is 21 days."

The vitamin C dip works best with crisper apples like Granny Smith and – the Dygerts' preferred variety – Empire Apples.

"We're experimenting with apple growers in this area to see what other varieties work with the anti-oxidant," Jeremy said. "We hope to build relationships with local growers. The northern climate typically produces a redder apple."

A final step in the slicing process dries the apples lightly. Removing the excess water keeps them from being mushy or slippery, Jeremy said.

The Dygerts have been helping school food distributors solve the slicing equation as they organize their new operation.

In fact, Jeremy said, Champlain Valley Specialty will launch a new fresh-apple snack product in the not-too-distant future.

It is one of two new ideas that are evolving from the refit operation.

The first, Grab Apples, is Jeremy's concept. Snappy, colorful packaging is being designed for the product now.

Fresh-sliced apples will be packaged in individual serving-sized bags so they can be added to a lunch box or backpack quickly. In time, the product will be sold with peanut butter and other dips. The second new product is Jerry's concept. Dip 'n

Dive is a ready-to-eat fresh snack package with Belgian Endive and savory dressings.

"Montreal is the largest endive market on the continent," Jeremy said. "My father and I are competing to see who's idea takes off first."

Just where do Jerry's ideas come from?

"In his dreams," Jeremy laughed.

"They're just what I think about at night," Jerry explained.

"We have a whole different look from stepping out in April," Jeremy said.

Innovation is an important part of the equation, he added.

"We don't worry about the big companies. We know our quality is very high."