



Downey Potato Farms worked with Alpha Poly Pack Solutions to create a flexible polybag, lending a touch of class to its potatoes while garnering a silver award at the 2013 PAC Packaging Competition.

PICTURE PERFECT POTATO PACKS

NEW PACKAGING CREATES OUTSTANDING RETAIL SHELF APPEAL FOR ONE OF ONTARIO'S LEADING POTATO GROWERS AND PACKERS

ANDREW JOSEPH, FEATURES EDITOR
PHOTOS BY COLE GARSIDE

Grown under the soil, the potato is known in French as *pomme de terre*—apple of the earth—a testament with religious overtones to the hearty goodness of the humble spud.

A starchy, tuberous crop, potatoes were a key ingredient in cultures in the Andes mountain range in South America, and were only introduced to the rest of the world a scant four centuries ago. Since that time, potatoes and its 3,000 or so varieties have become the planet's fourth-largest food crop after rice, wheat and corn, and have a wide field of uses ranging from human and animal food to distilling alcohol.

Prepared in many ways—skin-on or peeled, whole or cut—cooked potatoes can be eaten hot or cold, and are widely enjoyed as potato chips, potato salad, baked potatoes, French fries, hash

browns and pancakes, to name but a few lipsmacking possibilities. When one talks about potatoes and its place in the pantheon of Canadian farming, the Province of Ontario does not usually come to mind as a major contributor to the starchy tuber's estimated \$1-billion Canadian industry.

But while 2012 data compiled by **Stats Canada** shows that the country as a whole produced some 100.474 billion pounds of spuds across the 10 provinces, Ontario was right in the middle of the pack, growing over 7.505 billion pounds.

Situated in the town of Shelburne, about a 90-minute drive northwest of Toronto, **Downey Potato Farms** has been growing and selling potatoes since 1924, albeit it was recently purchased by a capital investment company.

But despite the Downey family no longer owning the farm outright,

the fourth generation of the Downey family, led by vice-president Trevor Downey, has not skipped a beat.



Trevor Downey,
Vice-President,
Downey Potato Farms

Projecting a boyish 'aw-shucks' attitude, even though the business is considered to be one of the largest potato growers in the



Working in line with a Volmpack 12000 six-head vertical filler, a Domino A-Series plus inkjet printer adds lot code data to closure tabs prior to placement onto polybags of potatoes.



The polybags designed by Downey Potato Farms and Alpha Poly contain a cutout coupon for a high-end restaurant that also naturally happens to utilize its spuds.

province, Downey estimates that both popular eateries utilize the the company grows, processes, high-quality spuds grown at interest,” says Downey. “That’s the best way to describe our new packages and co-packs over 100 Downey Potato Farms. million pounds of spuds per year. Despite Downey’s other food- packaging.” “My dad and uncle took over the related ventures, it still boils down Apparently Downey’s not the only family business back in 1970 and to the old family business of one, with **PAC—The Packaging Association** recently awarding the really began to grow it,” Downey potatoes. **Association** magazine during a visit to the company produces 15 different **Packaging Solutions** a silver picturesque farm, which it has premium-grade and specialty- award in the Flexibles Category of its **2013 PAC Packaging Competition**. **Loblaws** its biggest single retail customer, and its related brands since that time.

Game Face

While Shelburne has a population of just under 6,000, the Downey family name is well-known and respected in the town and surrounding area.

While Downey reluctantly admits to being a pretty decent hockey player who played professionally for ‘a cup of coffee’ in the minor leagues, he proudly notes that elder brother Aaron used to play for the famed Detroit Red Wings franchise of the **National Hockey League**, helping the team win the Stanley Cup in the 2007-2008 season.

And while Trevor did not find the same success as his brother on the ice, he has more than made up for it with his management of the farm and business growth, along with a few successful private ventures, such as his partnership in nearby Alliston restaurants: **The Bistro Burger Joint** and **The Poutine Joint**. Not surprisingly,

Downey relates that Alpha Poly Hunter Wilson, his farm manager first approached him about two-who oversees the 3,000 acres of and-a-half years ago wondering if potato fields, and to all his he might consider using their employees—like twins Paul and strong high-end plastic bags as a Perry Stevenson, who have been way to stand out on the grocery working for the business since shelves. 1975—but adds that while having Located in Brampton, a mere 20 a high-grade line of products is minutes northwest of Toronto, key to the success of any Alpha Poly is a Kerrigan family-owned packaging solutions business opening up its doors in 1989, with its primary product at that time being a PE (polyethylene) plastic bag designed specifically for the waste management market. With the second-generation of Kerrigan family running the day-to-day operations, Alpha Poly diversified into the flexible packaging converting business to include products for a wide range of industries, today serving foodservice and co-packing customers throughout the U.S. and Canada. “It was Spring 2011 when my sister Stephanie approached Downey Potato Farms with our

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matte finish LDPE (low-density-polyethylene) plastic bags,” explains Alpha Poly vice-president of sales and marketing Matthew Kerrigan.

Downey says he was initially reluctant to alter the company’s packaging set-up.

“But it had a matte finish as well as a glossy finish,” Downey recalls. “I had seen veggies packed in plastic, of course, but never with a combination matte-glossy finish. I told Alpha Poly that I was interested in applying a photographic image to the bag, and they said they would be able to do something for me.

“I just needed to figure out what eye-catching image to use.”

While sitting down one day for a meal at **Bistro 77**, he discovered the classy little Alliston restaurant used his potatoes on their menu.

“I immediately thought that I should strike up a partnership with **Bistro 77**,” admits Downey, “hoping that they could lend us a touch of class and credibility by helping us market the potatoes.

“I thought of combining imagery of **Bistro 77**’s owner and chef Jason Klausen with my potatoes onto the new plastic bags offered by Alpha Poly.”

Photo Finish

Contacting Alpha Poly, Downey outlined his vision, and three months later the farm was packing potatoes in the *LDPE* plastic bags complete with the photographic image he wanted.

“There wasn’t any great urgency about the project, but the turnaround time was quick,” relates Kerrigan, acknowledging that Downey was not only intrigued in an alternative form of packaging to paper, but that he was also impressed by the superior graphic design and high-quality printing options offered by the polybag.



After harvesting in autumn, Downey Potato Farms holds 70 million pounds of dirt-covered spuds at its cold-storage facilities for year-round production.

“Trevor provided the direction and vision for the design of the pack, and we put it together for him,” notes Kerrigan. “Our impetus was to provide a high-end look to help differentiate it from his competition by emphasizing the potato, while at the same time maintaining a real organic feel.”

Kerrigan says that Alpha Poly’s on-site graphic department created the design: right from the on-site photoshoot all the way through to the finished product.

“The unique combination of matte and glossy inks are very eye-catching,” says Kerrigan, adding that Alpha Poly uses a **Utenco Coral** press that it recently upgraded with automated computerized viscosity control to optimize print consistency from job to job.

Downey says that with help from Alpha Poly, who supplied the photographer, they took a day’s worth of photographs of Chef Klausen posing with his potato-based gourmet creations.

“I told Jay that I wanted him to prepare dishes utilizing specific potatoes, with the idea that each dish and photographic image, and the colors printed on a bag, would represent a particular potato variety,” Downey explains. “It’s been so well-received that we are now up to six different polybag creations, with more to come.”

More business was no problem for Alpha Poly, relates Kerrigan,

saying that even with the volatile nature of the retail market with shifts in demand and promotions, the ability to provide quick turnarounds for any customer has been aided significantly by its high-volume wicket bag converting equipment.

“Our philosophy at Alpha Poly has been to continually reinvest in our business, making capital investments in new equipment almost every year to either increase our capabilities or capacity,” explains Kerrigan.

“And when equipment wasn’t required, we invested in ‘lean manufacturing’ and continuous improvement training.”

Kerrigan says that 2013 will not be an exception, as Alpha Poly has plans for its largest expansion to date, which will include renovations to some freshly acquired space in its building.

“Because business is growing, we will be adding some new high-performance lamination and slitting equipment, and will also have a new printing press installed by the spring of 2014,” says Kerrigan.

“We feel that this expansion will give us an edge out in the marketplace that will really help to differentiate Alpha Poly from the competition.”

Along with the six variants in photographic imagery, Alpha Poly produces two different sizes for Downey Potato Farms—a 1.5-*mil* thick *LDPE* polybag for five-pound packs; and a 2.25-*mil* poly for 15-pound retail options.

Nice Surprise

“Both myself and Chef Klausen were pleasantly surprised at the positive reaction our potato bags garnered at the grocery stores around Ontario,” admits Downey, saying he is especially pleased with brisk sales of the **Bistro Bakers** and **Bistro Organics** brands.

After the annual September-October harvest, potatoes are brought to one of two huge cold storage facilities on Downey Farms property, where some 70 million pounds of spuds are kept at a temperature ranging from 38°F to 45°F.

When Downey Potato Farms is ready to process, the spuds are transferred to a huge mechanical bathtub to wash and scrub the dirt from its surface. "We recycle about 75 per cent of the water that flows through the washer, and we utilize four different filtration and sediment points," says Downey. The potatoes are quickly conveyed to a **Wyma Vegie-Polisher** system, which is a shaker-sorter that directs potatoes to fall through successively smaller openings. Once done, line workers perform a second visual check to remove potatoes not deemed to be up to the farm's stringent quality standards.

With the various sizes of potatoes conveyed to different points in the facility, the tubers move along the plant's Line 1 to a **Volm Volmpack 12000** six-head vertical bagger with a poly wicket attachment that can utilize both poly and paper bagging components to fill five- and 20-pound paperbags and three-, five-, 15- and 20-pound polybags. Mounted inline, a **Domino A Series Plus** inkjet coder is used to apply lot code data directly onto the bags. Other equipment includes:

- an **AFS** filler for packing 50-pound paperbags, with a **A Series Plus** inkjet coder applying code to the bag;
- a **Bernhard Upmann Verpackungsmaschinen Upmatic 2112d** 12-head double wicket filler—to fill five- and 20-pound paper, and three-, five, 15- and 20-pound polybags, with an **A Series Plus** inkjet coder placed inline;

• another **Volmpack 12000** used to fill five-, 10- and 20-pound paperbags, with an **A Series Plus** coder placed inline.

"For a customer like Loblaw's, we pack a lot of different SKUs," notes Downey, listing **Specialty President's Choice Organic** three-pound polybags; five-pound polybags of **President's Choice All Purpose Potatoes**; five-pound polybags **Bistro Baker**, for russet, white and yellow potato varieties; a five-pound paperbag for **Bistro Roasters**; 10-pound paperbags of **Fresh Cuts**; 10-pound paperbags of **Farmer's Market** for red, white and yellow varieties; and 15-pound **Downey's Jumbo Russet** and 20-pound polybag potato pack.

For all of the polybags filled by Downey Potato Farms, the **A Series Plus** inkjets apply lot code data directly onto the clip tag, which are then attached to the neck of each bag.

After filling, the polybags move via a conveyor system up to a second filler that drops a set number of polybags into a large paperbag provided by **Sac Drummond**. These paperbags are then sealed by an inline **Nordson ProBlue 4** adhesive system and readied for transport to the customer.

For Downey Potato Farms, its involvement with packaging has helped transform the company during various stages of its existence, and Downey credits the skill level of Alpha Poly staff for the most recent upswing.

"I enjoy working with Alpha Poly," says Downey. "They have a good team and they are very open-minded when it comes to articulating all the aspects I wanted in the design, and then taking the time to make it a reality."

As to the future, Downey says he looks forward to improving the retail potato category by adding new specialty spuds that are based

around taste and uniqueness, but in smaller packs.

"I also plan to move more brands onto the **Bistro** line—all with the classy look featuring Chef Klausen," says Downey, adding he looks forward to working with Alpha Poly well into the future.

"The new technologies that Alpha Poly keeps coming up with to improve the packaging also keeps me on my toes to come up with additional ways to utilize them," he says.

"It's fun actually: I don't have to change my product, but I can add a plethora of varieties and tastes the general public has never had the pleasure of trying before," he concludes.

"And by putting it into exciting new packaging options, I can change the way it is perceived in the market."

Source:

Canadian Packaging (May, 2013). *Picture Perfect Potato Packs*. www.canadianpackaging.com