

HERE FOOD PROCESSORS CAN FIND BOUNTIFUL GROWTH



CAROLINAS GATEWAY PARTNERSHIP

AT POPPIES, SUCCESS IS A FAMILY AFFAIR

By Lawrence Bivens



When Bobby Davis meets with Belgium-based owners of Poppies International NV, he knows what their initial question will be. “It’s the first thing they ask about: ‘the employees – are they happy,’” says Davis, who is controller at Poppies’ 85-worker operation in Nash County’s Whitaker Business & Industry Center.

Poppies International makes cream puffs and mini éclairs distributed under the Poppies and Delizza brand names, as well as private labels for retail grocers. Products made at its U.S. headquarters in Rocky Mount are shipped frozen to buyers across the U.S., Canada and Asia.

Still family-owned after 40 years in business, Poppies views its workforce like, well, family. And some of the plant’s employees literally are. On its staff are a number of brothers, sons and spouses. Davis’s wife, for example, works as Poppies’ logistics manager. “It’s a family-run business, and they have a strong sense of family,” Davis says. “You can see that in the way they treat their employees.”

The family orientation extends across the Atlantic. In 2016, when Poppies celebrated its 40th anniversary with a big bash at its headquarters in the Belgian town of Zonnebeke, Davis was among the eight U.S. employees flown to Europe for the occasion.

Poppies’ opened its Rocky Mount plant in 2001 and currently does about \$50 million in sales annually. It produces 7.5 million kilograms of frozen desserts each year. “Right now, we’re at full capacity,” says Davis. “We’re running three shifts six days a week.”

Much of the plant’s success rests on access to trainable and productive labor drawn from across the Twin Counties. Poppies’ workforce is also loyal.

“We have a lot of employees who have worked here the whole time the plant has been here,” says Heather Aycock, quality assurance manager at Poppies. The company has a frequent need for packaging workers, logistics staff and quality-assurance specialists. It works with several temporary agencies in screening and placing qualified candidates. After a 90-day trial period, Poppies brings new workers on permanently. When vacancies arise, the company encourages employees to recommend good candidates. “The best recruiting is word of mouth,” Aycock says.

Its diligent but relatively small workforce reflects the company’s emphasis on innovation and automation. Adopting the latest technologies helps ensure Poppies’ products have a consistent look, texture and taste. Still, there’s no substitute for the human eye. Posted regularly along the plant’s two production lines are personnel examining each éclair and cream puff and discarding those that aren’t up to par.

Other factors come together to make the Rocky Mount plant productive and profitable. It carefully sources ingredients from only high-quality suppliers. Close proximity to major highways and the Port of Norfolk conveniently connect the company and its products to national and global markets. Poppies’ partnership with North Carolina State University’s Department of Food Science helps with training and keeps the quality assurance department up to date on the latest federal regulations coming from the Food & Drug Administration. In return, Poppies offers itself as showcase for food manufacturing. “Their students tour here every year,” says Aycock, herself a chemical engineering graduate from N.C. State. The company is also talking to academics at nearby N.C. Wesleyan College about creating an internship program.

Given its automated production systems, refrigeration needs and round-the-clock operation, access to reliable and affordable utilities also is a critical factor. “We’re very happy with the reliability of power and water and for the responsive customer service we get from the City of Rocky Mount,” he says.

An innovative arrangement with Rocky Mount Public Utilities helps even-out seasonal spikes in energy rates while also ensuring against storm-related disruptions in service. The municipal power agency places a “peak-shaving” generator at the company’s site that can power Poppies production during periods of high demand -- hot summer afternoons, for example, or cold winter mornings, when grid-supplied electricity is at its most expensive. It also provides a source of emergency back-up power, something crucial to Poppies given FDA regulations on temperature controls and storage of perishable products. “If the power goes out, that generator kicks in within 20 seconds,” Davis says.

High-quality utilities are a reflection of the overall commitment Rocky Mount leaders have to helping keep the business community competitive, Davis believes. Local economic developers coordinate regular meetings of Whitaker Business & Industry Center tenants, for example, surfacing common challenges and ironing out solutions. Another group pulls together the region’s food manufacturers in an effort to identify and address downrange workforce needs. “The leadership here is very good,” Davis says.



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