



By Larry Arway

Gourmet labels on gourmet foods

Norpaco, a gourmet food manufacturer in New Britain, CT, USA, that specializes in hand-stuffed peppers, olives and other tasty items, started out by selling bar supplies and snacks back in 1946. Dean Spilka and his father, Donald, bought the business 20 years ago. “We worked with Dion Label Printing of Westfield, MA, right from the beginning, when things were really tough,” Dean says, “and they hung with us through the difficult times when we all wondered if we were going to make it.” (See March 2008 profile of Dion Label in L&NW.)

One of the many reasons Dean is a proponent of Dion Label is that it was a real partner before that became a buzzword. Dean says, “Quality is our number one issue. Profits are important, but quality is what we strive for. We work with vendors who are willing to work with us as far as changing or making their products fit ours,” he adds. “In the case of Dion, we’d send them an order and they would proof-read our labels, catch errors that we missed and get the corrected copy back to us prior to running our labels. And through the years they have consistently responded with the same type of quality and service which we pride ourselves on giving to our customers. They reflect our own standards.”

About the time that the Spilkas bought Norpaco, the business climate for such products as huge jars of pickled eggs was mainly limited to bars and social clubs, and the writing was on the wall that things had to change. “We came up with what we call a cherry pepper shooter,” Dean recalls, “which is a cherry pepper hand-stuffed with prosciutto ham and provolone cheese. In the early years, we would go to the local deli and have them slice the prosciutto real thin (we couldn’t afford a slicer) and we’d tell them to give us the pro-



Labels for Norpaco, a Connecticut gourmet food manufacturer, are produced by Dion Label Printing of Massachusetts.

volone in a chunk so we could cube it in the factory.”

They started off making 6.5 gallon jars of the pepper shooters and would sell them to the taverns. They went to a food show where they met a broker who sampled the product and loved it. He took it to a buyer at Costco Wholesale Club who liked it so much that he wrote out an order on the spot. At this point, Norpaco realized they needed an actual label. Having a product on the shelf where it competes with other foodstuffs for the consumer’s dollar was a whole different animal than a jar of pickled eggs on a bar!

“Our first label was simple, just two colors, black and yellow, with only print and no graphics,” Dean says. “Dion would say, ‘We have a designer here, maybe we can help,’ and the process of continuous improvement would start rolling along.” Norpaco is now working on the fourth generation of that first label and its product line has graduated

to a gourmet level, nationally manufactured product. In addition to Costco, customers now include all the major supermarkets from Baltimore to Boston, including A&P, ShopRite, Stop & Shop, Sam's Club and Shaw's Supermarkets.

Another product that has taken off like wildfire is the stuffed olives, which can be found in olive bars in upscale markets all across the US. The company decided one day to try a bleu cheese stuffed olive, which proved to be a real winner at olive bars. Norpaco has even trademarked some of its most popular items, like the olive and pepper shooters and the olive medleys. While the business has grown to some 110 different product offerings, the company is still expanding the food horizon. The newest items now in test marketing on the West Coast are an antipasti Toscani platter as well as marinated artichoke and Portobello mushroom salads with roasted red peppers and spices.

Since the cherry pepper was one of Norpaco's premier sellers, they had to adjust when many of their growers decided to retire and their heirs didn't want any part of a business that requires hand picking, and sold off the farmlands to real estate developers. One of the Norpaco purchasing agents found growers in Peru who were willing to work with Norpaco to develop a new pepper. Called "Sweetypepp," it is a small pepper about 1¼" in diameter that is great for hand stuffing. Norpaco sent cherry pepper seeds to the growers and they crossed them with their own red bell peppers. The company already has four different stuffed Sweetypepps and undoubtedly will find more uses for this versatile product.

Just as Norpaco has been able to adapt to changing market conditions and even come up with new products to make and sell, Dion Label is also staying out in front with new technology. Dion recently purchased an MPS EF Hybrid 410

printing system, which provides automatic registration at speeds up to 650 fpm. Each print station, laminating station and nip point of the press is controlled by a separate servo motor/control system to maintain web tension. Custom, large diameter chillers are on all stations to allow running very thin unsupported films. Owner John Dion says, "This new press is going to help us even up the balance between our digital work and our flexo operation." Dion also just installed a new EskoArtwork prepress system, which will facilitate sending artwork to plate creation or to the digital press.

These two companies, Norpaco and Dion Label, report that they have both been able to maintain sustained growth in spite of tough economic conditions. The secret has been to put the spotlight on innovation and service. Their manufacturing approach to their markets are different – Dion Label has gone down the road with the newest technology available while Norpaco still does much of its USDA manufacturing operation with hand packing. But Norpaco also went the technology route when it had to replace peppers that were no longer available in the quantities they needed.

The next time you're in an upscale supermarket or olive bar, take a closer look at the items. Those intriguing stuffed olives and cherry peppers or Sweetypepps are very likely a product of Connecticut based Norpaco. And remember, to get all of those stuffed peppers facing outward in a jar is a job for nimble fingers – hand packed means just that. ●

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