

fresh CUT

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F&S Produce

Freshness & Safety are
Our Commitment



FRESHNESS & SAFETY

F&S Produce focuses on food safety and quality with SQF Level 3 certification

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Rosenhayn, N.J.-based F&S Produce Co. Inc celebrates 30 years in the fresh produce industry this year, and company founder and chief executive officer Sam Pipitone Jr. has added to his management team to continue to grow and expand nationally.

Pipitone hired Lou Cooperhouse, previously the director of the Rutgers Food Innovation Center and senior management consultant to a number of multi national corporations, as the president and chief operating officer in November, and Sam Pipitone III joined the company as the vice president of operations in May 2009 after graduating from PennState University. Pipitone is teaching his son the business, and with Cooperhouse overseeing organizational and corporate development, he's able to look to some of the bigger issues to continue to grow market opportunities.

"It's a new phase for me in my life," Pipitone said. "Over the years I've been focused on growing my business, and we're still doing that, but now I have other people to help me as we continue to look forward."

F&S Produce has experienced double-digit growth in recent years – a result of strategic partnerships, new products and the vertically-integrated organization of the company.

The company is well-known on the East Coast, and its products can be found in both retail supermarkets and as ingredients in industrial applications. But recent partnerships will help F&S Produce create a national presence. The company has a key strategic partnership with Renaissance Food Group, which markets the Garden Highway and Garden Highway Chef Essentials brands.

"Our partnership with Renaissance Food Group has enabled us to gain market share growth throughout the Northeast region," Pipitone said.



F&S Produce also is part of the Mott's sliced apple program, which allows the company to offer retail bags and trays at retail under the Mott's label. A partnership with Mann Packing is in the works, which will provide F&S Produce with another national brand and allow Mann Packing to offer longer shelf life and improved quality on the East Coast.

But partnerships are only a part of the growth at F&S Produce. The company recently received USDA certification so it can begin making products with meat and poultry. A new line of sandwiches and wraps has been developed and is available to foodservice customers and retail markets, including convenience stores.

Cooperhouse said the diversified offerings are part of the company's business model, which is diversified among markets and products. F&S Produce services retail, foodservice and institutional customers, so the company's products can be found at supermarkets and restaurants, or they're used as ingredients in other products like soups and salsas.

"The retail fresh-cut and industrial accounts have grown considerably over the years," Pipitone said.

The products offered to the different outlets also are diversified, Cooperhouse said. F&S Produce offers fresh-cut fruits – cantaloupe, honeydew, mango, watermelon and pineapple – and fresh-cut vegetables – carrot sticks, celery sticks, jicama, butternut squash and more. Other value-added products include fajita mixes, stuffing mixes and stuffed portabello mushrooms. The latest diversified offering is a new puree line for industrial and food service customers, and a new line of portion-controlled produce items for school systems, Cooperhouse said.

The fresh-cut, frozen and value-added refrigerated food products from F&S maintain the highest quality from raw material harvesting to the customer, and are done so with the strictest of food safety measures. Once the raw product comes into the plant, it's handled so that quality is maintained throughout the process – temperatures are monitored and recorded and even the machinery is designed to minimize harm.

F&S Produce has its own in-house fabrication department that designs and builds processing equipment to the plant's specifications. Automation is important, Cooperhouse said,



Sam Pipitone Jr., center, founder and CEO; with Sam Pipitone III, left, vice president operations; and Lou Cooperhouse, right, president and COO.



Doug Nicoll, director of technical services, and Curtis Lee, freezer operations manager, reviewing equipment calibration prior to startup of F&S's new puree line. *Photos courtesy of F&S Produce*



Left, trailer-lift system for unloading fresh carrots. Right, pureed carrots, that have been sanitized, chopped and pasteurized, are filled into drums in the HEP[®]-filtered clean room.

but sometimes the fastest automation doesn't lend itself to the best quality. Machinery designed in-house focuses on quality and food safety, which the sanitation department is responsible for. Pipitone said that department is "one of his shining stars," and is part of the reason F&S Produce has never been implicated in a foodborne illness outbreak in its 30-year history.

Everything is designed for food safety and quality at F&S Produce. That's the focus of the company's re-branding, which will include a new website set to go online this month. The F&S name was created by the original founders, but is now meant to stand for freshness and safety.

"Freshness and safety are our commitment," Cooperhouse said.

Assurance of the safety and quality of F&S Produce products is through the Food Marketing Institute's Safe Quality Food (SQF) Institute. The Global Food Safety Initiative-recognized standard is designed to meet the needs

F&S Produce Co., Inc.

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F&S line of fresh-cut vegetables and side dishes, shown in an array of packaging forms that are available.



Fruit trays are being assembled and check-weighed within high-care facility before going to separate packaging area.

of buyers and suppliers, with food safety and quality metrics, and thousands of companies worldwide are certified by the 13 licensed certification agencies.

The SQF certification covers growers and produces under the SQF 1000 code, and manufacturers and processors are measured against the SQF 2000 code. There are three levels to SQF 2000 that processors can shoot for: Level 1 is a measure of the food safety fundamentals, Level 2 includes a certified HACCP food safety plan (and is the GFSI recognition level) and Level 3 is a comprehensive food safety and quality management systems certification.

F&S Produce, which has in the past gone the American Institute for Baking audits and the GMA-SAFE audit route, has been certified SQF 2000 Level 3. Few food manufacturers have reached that level, Pipitone said, and F&S Produce is a pioneer in the fresh-cut industry in reaching that level. The advantage to being certified by a program like SQF is it eliminates some of the duplicate audits that a customer might otherwise require.

"If you're Level 3, you can ultimately avoid some of those other audits because it's a national standard," Pipitone said.

The SQF certification is a project the company has been working on for a few years, and it was led by Doug Nicoll, the technical services director for F&S Produce.

The SQF Level 3 certification verifies that F&S Produce has the food safety and quality systems in place, and that they adhere to the systems.

F&S Produce is a vertically-integrated company, which allows the company to monitor and control the products all the way to the customer. The procurement department maintains a close relationship with the growers locally and throughout North, Central and South America, because the quality starts in the field, Pipitone said.

"You have to start with the right quality raw materials to maintain that shelf life you put on the bag," he said. "That's what we build this business around is quality."

F&S Produce procures 100 million pounds of fresh produce a year and manages a 100,000-square-foot processing space within its two new Jersey facilities. This spring F&S will complete a 25,000-square-foot addition to one of its plants, which will enable significant growth. Pipitone also owns Mid-Eastern Cold Storage, which is a 60,000-square-foot cold storage facility with blast freezing and frozen storage capabilities. Distribution is handled by another arm of the company called Pipco Transportation, which manages 30 tractor rigs and 100 trailers. Even waste material is a revenue stream, with Organic Land Developers returning more than 500,000 pounds of organic waste to fields each week. ■



One of 10 new trailers recently purchased by Pipco Transportation showcasing the new F&S logo.