

# Czech nibbles

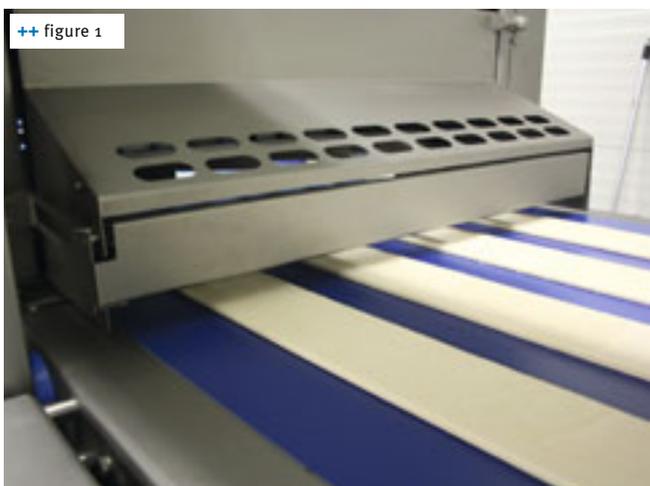
JANA VEČERKOVÁ – VEST IS WELL KNOWN IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC FOR ITS SNACKS SUCH AS PRETZEL STICKS, CHEESE STICKS AND PARTY MIXES. ACCORDING TO ITS OWN STATEMENT, IT IS THE ONLY CZECH BUSINESS SELLING TWISTED CHEESE STICKS PRODUCED IN-HOUSE FROM PUFF PASTRY – AND A FURTHER EXPANSION IS NOT EXCLUDED



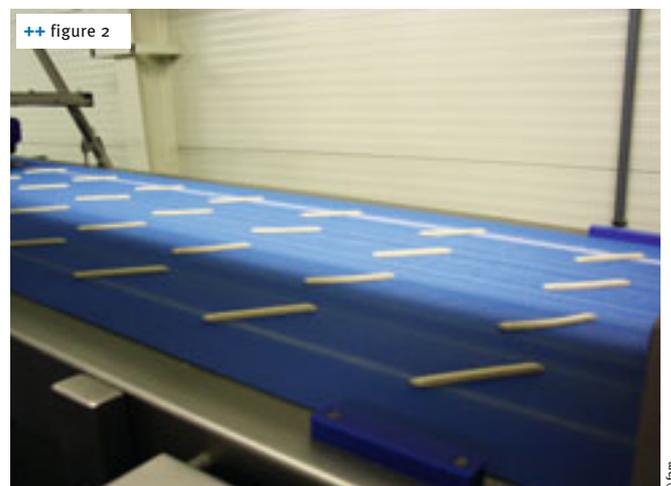
✚ The Czech Republic is a small country with a population of just under 10m where the baked products market is, even today, supplied mainly by national businesses. This is true not only for freshly baked goods such as bread and rolls, the majority of which come from the two industrial bakeries Delta Pekarny and Odkolek, but also for the long life baked products and snacks, which are made by Czech companies and are produced and delivered within their own country. One example is Jana Večerková – VEST in Zlin, a business that specializes in salty snacks such as salty sticks, crackers of different tastes and shapes and other mixes from these products. The name Vest also clearly illustrates the pride taken from being a purely Czech family business, because it consists of the

founder's surname and the name of the first product: Večerka's Salted Sticks. 70 % of Vest's products are sold in the Czech Republic and 30 % go to Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Russia and Estonia. Managing Director Jana Večerková says, "We would be happy for a larger proportion to be exported, but that's not so easy. The competition abroad for producing salty snacks is strong."

The company certainly has a firm position in the Czech and Slovak markets. Vest produces approx. 100 different products and as ever, the classical pretzel sticks remain the most popular and are sold in boxes, bags and trays ranging from 40–250 g. 50 % of the product range is sold over-the-counter as their own brand; the other half is sold under commercial labels at



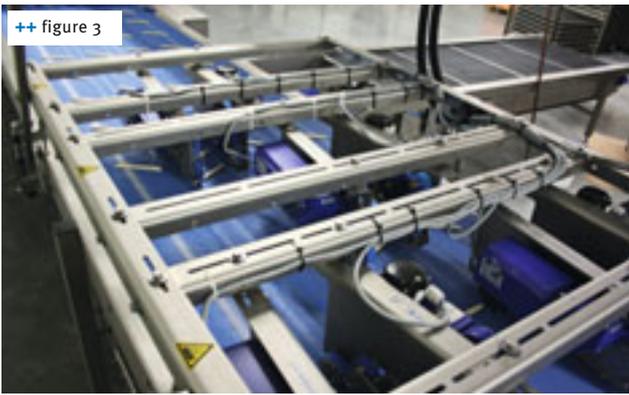
++ figure 1



++ figure 2

++ figures 1+2

The guillotine cuts individual sticks to the correct size from the four rows of dough sheet; the sticks are then carried to twisting modules



++ figure 3

The twist modules are mounted above the dough sheet so they process all four rows in a staggered arrangement

Kaufland, Metro, Tesco, Ahold, Coop and Billa, that is to say at most of the retail chains represented in the Czech and Slovak Republics. Since the start of 2012, Vest has covered approx. 60 hypermarkets and 2,000 supermarkets in the Czech Republic and 3,000 in Slovakia, and this is showing an upward trend. It is only since the relocation and production expansion in 2000 at the present site in Zlin-Louky that the company has been able to operate to this magnitude. Overall, the family business has undergone enormous development throughout the 21 years since its foundation in 1991, particularly in the last 12 years in Zlin. Vest started out purely as a distribution business and remained as such for five years (until 1996), buying products and selling them on in the Czech Republic. In 1996 the Večerková family started its own small production operation with a line for classical pretzel sticks in Bohuslavice u Zlina. It was not long before the demand for Vest pretzel sticks necessitated a second line. Vest also started manufacturing crackers in 1999. The new building in 2000 finally unified production facilities on a single 2,000 m<sup>2</sup> site in Zlin. A hall for twisted puff pastry sticks was added in 2011, with the result that it has been possible to carry out the work much more effectively and efficiently with an expanded orientation. Today, in addition to salt sticks and crackers, Vest manufactures products such as pretzels, short sticks, cheese and potato sticks, mixes and sticks made from puff pastry.

A conspicuous feature of the small Czech company Vest and its 50 employees is that it ventures into new areas. Večerková says, "Courage is needed, especially if one wants to expand abroad." Thus the Managing Director is now focusing specifically on a new product range with twisted sticks made from puff pastry under the "Prima" name. The company itself says it is currently the only producer in the Czech Republic. For the Prima range, which has up to now consisted of salty sticks and cheese sticks, Vest uses a 3-section laminator and make-up line from the Rademaker BV Company, Culemborg, the Netherlands. The special aspect of the custom design for Vest is the twister, in which pieces approx. 10 cm long are individually twisted. This component follows at the end of the plant, after the dough has passed through the usual route via a 3 roll extruder and fat pump ▶

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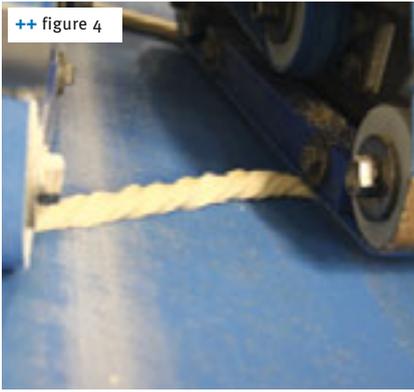
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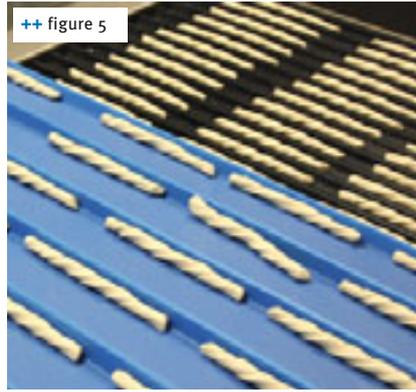
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++ figure 4

Miniature tapes twist the individual dough sticks from the ends



++ figure 5

For more accurate positioning, the dough sticks move from one conveyor belt to another with segregated areas



++ figure 6

An employee checks the baking tray with the dough pieces before putting it into the rack for proofing

to a dough sheet and from there through several roll-down units (which Rademaker calls quick reducers) and laminators. Following three sections with laminators and quick reducers, the dough sheet is now only approx. 1 cm thick. From here it is cut and spread into four rows. Next a guillotine creates dough sticks 10 cm long; these lie in a staggered arrangement on the belt and are carried to twisters, i.e. twisting modules that are identically staggered. The twisters now individually twist the dough pieces. The usual procedure in other companies is to cut longer dough sticks, twist and proof them, and then afterwards cut them to their final size. Area Sales Manager Mark Haarsma explains that, "The advantage of the way that Rademaker does it with cutting before proofing makes the entire handling simpler, and that saves time." There are four modules for twisting – one per dough row – each with two narrow belts running over a roller system in the opposite direction to the conveyor belt with the sticks lying on it. The dough pieces are, so to speak, forcibly passed between the conveyor belt and the twisting belt; this means that the different running speed of the narrow belts twists the dough pieces on themselves from their ends. The dough pieces leave this section of the line by being staggered further and carried onward at a slightly oblique angle on the belt.

The exact positioning then takes place with the dough pieces being put onto a conveyor belt with partition walls installed

every couple of centimetres; this ensures that the four rows run accurately alongside one another. From here the small dough pieces are transferred onto baking trays which have depressions and are specifically provided for this purpose. An employee then loads the baking trays into a rack trolley and pushes this into the proofing room. When cheese sticks are made at the plant, grated cheese is sprinkled into the dough in the first section (i.e. downstream of the interaction between the extruder and the fat pump). Haarsma says, "The line is already prepared in its entirety to operate as a fully automatic system." The company is also ready for an extension to the present site. Preparations have been made for further listing, i.e. the inclusion of the product into a retail chain's product range, whereby according to Jana Večerková the target for 2012 is to improve sales by approx. 20%. Of course it is always a balancing act, because according to Večerková there is the risk that one's own brand may be displaced from the market. "But we must remain adaptable," explains the Managing Director. The company is also stepping up its international possibilities. Initially Vest implemented HACCP into its production and it is now IFS certificated at its higher level. In addition, the company is exhibiting at European trade fairs such as the ISM in Cologne, the PLMA in Amsterdam and the SIAL in Paris – so more European consumers can also enjoy Czech nibbles. +++



++ figure 7

Vest has bought a new packing line for the Prima range, enabling automated transfer all the way from the exit of the Miwe oven to the sealed package units



++ figure 8

The company wants to use the Prima product group to grow – even beyond the Czech borders

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