

# ppnnow

## VOICES

## Champion of Champions

A visit to Champion Petfoods' brand-new facility reveals what it has preached for years—that it does things differently.

BY B.C. HENSCHEN

The other day I overheard a couple of guys talking about who should be on the best-players-ever list. I replied with, "Of course Peter should be on that list." One guy asked, "Do you mean Pete Rose?" Pete Rose? I'm not sure who he was talking about, but my mind already is spinning with my top five.

I tell them "Peter Atkins, co-founder of Natura Pet Products; Reiner Muhlenfeld, founder of Champion Petfoods; Peter Muhlenfeld, vice president of sales and marketing for Champion Petfoods; Tom Nieman, founder of Fromm Family Foods, and of course John Rademakers, co-founder of Natura Pet."

As they walked away, bemused, I felt they weren't talking about the "best players ever in the pet food manufacturing game."

I preach that retailers should visit the manufacturers they represent and ask lots of questions. Walking a plant floor and seeing the machinery and how it works, as well as looking over the ingredients are all important. My main motivation during a tour is to meet key people you probably won't run into at a trade show.

Manufacturing pet foods safely and with the right ingredients is a difficult game that really boils down to people. The key to manufacturing a great food usually is the extruder operator and the quality

and safety teams. Talk with those people and you will learn more about that pet food than you ever would at a trade show.

Recently I visited Champion Petfoods' brand-new kitchens in Auburn, Ky. I was excited for this trip because I finally could see with my own eyes what Champion has preached for years—that it does things differently.

I have visited many manufacturing facilities; they all share similarities. Typically, the outside resembles a large industrial building with some silos and is stuck in the middle of a cornfield or an industrial park. Inside is a receiving area, possibly two, for ingredients. The next area usually is the prep area, where ingredients are ground and blended. Next comes the extruder. Then, finally, is drying and coating in the packaging area. Everyone does things a bit differently, but those are the basics.

When I pulled into the parking lot, Champion's facility appeared to fall in line with the huge industrial building stuck into a rural area idea, but there were noticeable differences. The first thing I noticed was its massiveness. When I visited the Natura plant it was 150,000 square feet (it has since added on), and this one is more than 370,000 square feet.

I didn't see the typical massive yard of semi trucks or towers or grain silos. Champion obvious-

ly designed the property so the transportation side is unnoticeable from the entrance.

I witnessed the no-silo movement years ago, when John Rademakers built his Natura plant in 2003 with a large, one-of-a-kind concrete tower that offered better material handling and food safety than any metal silo. Champion took that concept one step further by completely eliminating those large bulk-storage buildings. All ingredients are stored inside the building.

The interior is equally impressive. Frankly, I expected no less because I hold Champion in such high regard, and I knew everything would be bright and shiny. More differences between a typical pet food manufacturing facility and the new Champion facility became apparent literally with our first step. We stood in a huge refrigerator—and I'm not talking about going into a big walk-in cooler. No, 25,000 square feet of this building is a refrigerator. Forklifts and equipment operate inside this massive refrigerator.

I noticed equipment I hadn't seen before. One was a plate freezer—a massive piece that freezes ingredients for proper storage. Champion uses some seasonal ingredients that are hard to find off season. The plate freezer allows the company to purchase large quantities of seasonal fresh ingredients and freeze them for later use. The freeze-drying operation wasn't anything new, but Champion freeze dries ingredients that then are used in its kibble in addition to making its freeze-dried foods and treats.

In the extrusion area and drying area, I learned about the processes and equipment Champion uses to make its high-meat-inclusion kibble. It's impressive.

I haven't talked a lot about food safety, but trust me—Champion is trendsetting in that department. In fact, when the FDA



visited, agents asked if they could use Champion as a model for others to follow. The company uses x-ray machines as part of its food safety. X-ray machines are becoming more common in human food manufacturing, but I'm not sure how common they are in pet food manufacturing. They analyze the final bagged product for contaminants, and the software compares the images to verify other quality assurance items. I think every manufacturing facility I have visited uses a magnet machine, which obviously only captures metal contaminants. If someone drops their keys in, they'll be caught. Plastic, bone fragments, hair—well, the magnet isn't real helpful there.

One heavily promoted aspect of this state-of-the-art kitchen is the control room, which I was apprehensive about. I admit, it is impressive; it resembles an air traffic control center, with racks of servers and walls of monitors. This control room monitors every aspect of the kitchen. It knows ingredient temperatures, formulas, machine specifications and so much more.

I was apprehensive because I feared automation had taken control of everything. Making a

kibble with an extrusion process truly is an art. Ingredients aren't always identical because they once were living animals. Some variations are acceptable, but the process requires modification to make a consistent product. I was worried they had removed that human touch. However, the extrusion operators are still the chefs; they monitor the processes and the product, and fine-tune it as needed. Sometimes, when the stress of running my own business gets me down, I dream about having a job as an extrusion operator. That's not weird, is it?

I was very happy with what I saw and heard on this tour, but I really am only touching on a fraction of it. I also spoke with ingredient suppliers, contractors who built the place and more. Every question was answered honestly and thoroughly. I even asked a question that many companies will not answer under the umbrella of "proprietary information," but company reps answered it and simply asked me not to share it. Why is that so important to me? That's how I know I am talking honestly to my customers. I sure hope other manufacturers pay attention to what Champion is doing.



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