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MORE PRODUCTS, MORE JOBS

Pepperidge Farm's Lakeland Bakery Is Up and Running

New \$23 million bread production line enjoys 'normal startup.'

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ERNST PETERS | Ledger photos

Marnique Bryant, Pepperidge Farm employee, adjusts bread dough as it is loaded into baking pans.

LAKELAND | It's up. It's running. And bread is baking.

Pepperidge Farm's Lakeland plant officially cut the ribbon on its new \$23 million bread production line Tuesday.

The line first started producing bread in mid-June. The several weeks that have passed since is a normal period of time to troubleshoot the machinery, said the Lakeland plant manager, Gary Tarr.

"It's been a normal startup," Tarr said.

"It's wonderful for the plant and good for the community. It's been very well-received by our employees."

The line is currently running at two-thirds its capacity, producing Pepperidge Farm's Farmhouse, Natural and Light breads. The bread produced on the new breadline is distributed primarily in Florida.

It should be running fully by the end of 2009. It will then produce 31 million loaves a year, up from its current 20 million.

Twenty-eight employees have been hired for the new breadline; by the time it's running at its full capacity, that number will have been increased to 73. Pepperidge Farm employs 315 locally and 4,500 companywide; in addition, it utilizes 4,000 independent operators to distribute its products.

The new breadline employees, which include production workers who deal in the daily making of bread, and sanitation workers who clean the machinery, make between \$14 and \$17 an hour and work on a full-time basis.

The breadline took a year to build and entailed a 20,000-square-foot addition to the Pepperidge Farm facility. Total square footage is now 320,000.

In town to celebrate the breadline, Tim Hassett, senior vice president and general manager of meals and accompaniments, explained Pepperidge Farm's approach to the tumultuous economy.

"We're going to play our game," Hassett said. "We've seen our competitors compromise on ingredients and quality. We're doing just the opposite."

Hassett said Pepperidge Farm's customers are willing to make sacrifices to have the products. One such sacrifice: in the past 12 months, prices for fresh bakery products, including bread and rolls, have increased 10 percent to 12 percent. A driving force behind the increase, Hassett said, has been price increases for wheat.

Beyond raising prices, Pepperidge Farm has concentrated on finding and creating efficiencies to weather the economic turmoil. While the company has not had layoffs, Hassett said, it hasn't added employees as quickly as it might have otherwise. Also, the company has cut back on non-essential expenses.

The next 24 to 36 months at Pepperidge Farm will bring an emphasis on products that offer more health benefits, Hassett said.

The company is also set to launch a new advertising campaign that will increase the company's presence in radio, TV, online and print ads by 20 percent. The ads will emphasize how the company is differentiating itself from its competitors, Hassett said.

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