



M.L. Catania Company Limited director of sales and marketing Mario Masellis (left) and general manager Neil Catania with some of the semi-exotic fruits the Toronto-headquartered company grows, packs and distributes around the world.



FINDING THEIR NICHE

Canadian distributor of fresh fruits uses new trayformer to achieve huge savings on per unit costs

BY ANDREW JOSEPH, FEATURES EDITOR
PHOTOS BY NAOMI HILTZ

Within the global fruitpacking sector, more is usually considered better: more variety, more markets to tap—certainly many a business has tapped that plan to great financial success.

But one Canadian company has shunned the ‘more is more’ mentality, and has instead found global renown and success with its niche business plan.

Founded in 1929 by Michael Leonard Catania at the onset of the global depression, **M.L. Catania Company Limited** was set up as a produce import and distribution business to service the Toronto area.

Nowadays, the company remains a family business, but rather than the localized Toronto market, M.L. Catania has found its niche as an exotic fresh fruits importer and distributor with a global focus.

Founder’s son Paul Sr. joined the company in 1946,

but it wasn’t until current president and owner Paul Jr. joined the family business in 1975, that the company expanded its vision to be more global, with international expansion throughout the northern and southern hemispheres.

Always a big player in the fresh fruits market, M.L. Catania is now considered to be a true global player and leader.

Despite the company’s continued forward momentum in regards to its growing customer base as a 21st century business that utilizes new world innovation and business approaches, M.L. Catania does so by using an old world tradition of small business charm.

That so-called old-fashioned charm is hardly lost on current ownership, as company director of sales and marketing Mario Masellis attests.

After Chinese gooseberry fruits were transported and grown in New Zealand, Michael Catania was one of the first people in the world to fly there and

import them to Canada.

“It failed miserably,” Masellis told *Canadian Packaging* during a recent visit to the modern Mississauga, Ont.-based company headquarters. “Figuring it had more to do with its name, our company founder and a few other like-minded individuals got together and came up with a new name for the hairy, but delicious fruit.

“Taking their cue from where these fruits were being grown, and borrowing from the existing national bird, the name kiwi was chosen,” says Masellis. “And the rest is history.”

From within the 40,000-square-foot plant floor with an additional 5,000 square feet of loft storage, Catania says the facility has seven coolers that provide 250,000 cubic feet of cold storage, and provides 3,000 square feet of office space.

M.L. Catania Worldwide continues to sell kiwi, with some 40 percent of its business derived from



M.L. Catania uses a VassoyoAir automatic trayforming machine designed and manufactured by Eagle Packaging Machinery to pack lemons, limes and clementine fruits, as well as larger types of fruits such as grapefruit into the stackable corrugated trays.



The HMI (human-machine interface) on the VassoyoAir trayformer manufactured by Eagle Packaging Machinery is easy to use, helping M.L. Catania employees easily alter glue patterns on corrugated tray blanks as required.



A peek inside the VassoyoAir automatic trayforming machine.

the importation and packaging of the former Chinese gooseberry across North America and the world.

Catania says that limes and figs each represent approximately 20 percent of its business, with remaining number taken up by a wide range of fruits such as mango, pomegranate, cactus pears, clementines (a hybrid between a mandarin orange and a sweet orange), persimmons, avocado, figs, papaya, plums, grapes, pears, lemons and a few others.

Along with its Canadian-based Catania Worldwide, the company started up several other companies: **Stellar Distributing**, and **Maple Leaf Ranch** in Madera, California, and **Catania Mexico** in Mexico.

Stellar Distributing moves product through the western U.S., and also has a packaging and distribution center in Vineland, NJ that services the east coast of America.

Showing its heritage, the aptly named Maple Leaf Ranch is a division of Catania Worldwide that grows products like figs and persimmons exclusively for Stellar Distributing.

Catania Mexico grows, packs and ships its products—figs and limes—to both the Vineland and Madera facilities, as well as to the Mississauga headquarters.

“Many people think that a particular fruit just comes from one part of the world,” says Masellis. “But to access non-greenhouse fruit year-round, we have farms we deal with all over the world.

“For example, the kiwi we package comes from Italy, New Zealand, the U.S. and Chile, all are available at different times of the year.”

He notes that even though a fruit may be available year round from different sources, M.L. Catania imports different varieties, such as standard mangoes, and the golden mango that is sweeter, with a literal melt-in-your-mouth constancy.

Masellis says that along with growing and shipping their own niche fruits, the company imports its fruits from known growers around the world, adding that the Mississauga facility of M.L. Catania is the Canadian distribution center and importer of fruits from the company’s other divisions in Mexico and California.

“We bring fruit in from those areas and from around the world, creating custom packaging in bulk and in specific sizes per customer requirements,” relates Masellis, adding that the company can count **Costco**, **Loblaws**, **Sobeys**, **Metro** and others, amongst its large customer base.

M.L. Catania Worldwide has over 50 SKUs (stock-keeping units) consisting of the aforementioned fruits and their various packaging types and sizes.

One of the packaging options from Catania Worldwide is its stackable corrugated tray pack, an initiative that came onboard approximately 18 months ago, and is formed by a very unique piece of automated equipment manufactured by **Eagle Packaging Machinery**—a **VassoyoAir** automatic trayforming machine.

Eagle Packaging Machinery—part of the Paxiom Group—was established in 1998 and is headquartered in Miami, Fla.



AUTOMATE NOW

Eagle Packaging Machinery manufactures a wide range of end-of-line packaging systems, including automatic case erecting, trayforming, pick-and-place and robotic palletizing solutions. Its well-known brands include the *Vassoyo*, *Boxxer* and *PopLok*.

M.L. Catania general manager Neil Catania says this *VassoyoAir* automatic trayforming machine was custom-made to its exact specifications.

“The box we use is special, so we needed a tray former that could efficiently fold down the top flaps, and fold up the side flaps and glue it all together—and that’s what Eagle Packaging Machinery gave us,” expresses Catania.

The *VassoyoAir* uses Venturi vacuum technology to gently pull a single corrugated blank from the hopper, fed under the glue guns that apply a hotmelt adhesive to the minor flaps of the tray courtesy of a **Nordson ProBlue 10** adhesive system.

Catania says that “the Nordson takes the adhesive in a pellet format, sucks it up into the heating chamber of the machine, where it is melted at a temperature of 350°F before it is pumped through a series of hoses to four different nozzles, where it is sprayed onto specific pre-determined locations onto the formed corrugate case.”

The blanks continue past a ram mandrel, where it is forced down through corner folders to form the tray.

The tray is then held within a compression area until the next tray enters the forming section, at which time it is dropped onto a discharge conveyor to exit the machine.

“Despite the complexity of our tray format, I’m impressed with the speed of the *VassoyoAir* in forming it,” says Catania, noting that it is engineered to form and glue stackable produce trays at up to 25 cycles per minute, though they run it slightly slower “at a rate of 22 trays a minute.”

Catania also raved about the *Vassoyo-Air’s* ease-of-use.

“It offers us quick change-overs, low maintenance,” he says. “And for our operators, it has a color touchscreen inter-face that easy allows to alter glue patterns on the corrugated blanks.

“The interface also provides us with full access to all functions and timing of the *VassoyoAir*.”

According to Eagle Packaging Machinery vice-president of sales Anthony Del Viscio, he believes M.L. Catania chose Eagle Packaging Machinery because “we have the unique ability in offering custom-engineered solutions, and take the time to fully understand the expectation of our customers in order to ensure we not only meet them, but exceed them.”

He says Eagle Packaging Machinery takes great pride in its ability to manufacture robust packaging systems that remain easy-to-use and fairly-priced.

“The *VassoyoAir* has helped M.L. Catania save some 80 percent in labor costs over hand-folding trays,” relates Catania, adding that they also save on corrugated materials because glued trays use less board—some 25 percent—on these hand-folded trays.

“Then there’s also the fact that we can save space by producing trays on demand rather than having to do so in batches, which helps free-up floorspace,” says Catania. “As well, by not having to store corrugated flats on the floor, and by folding on demand, M.L. Catania has increased its hygiene and eliminated possible contamination risks.”

According to Eagle Packaging Machinery, the *VassoyoAir* can run large or small tray sizes and with or without a lid, proving options for the processor.

Manufactured by WestRock Company, the corrugated trays and cartons used by M.L. Catania are purchased via the Toronto-based Stesco Global Packaging Corporation, that Catania says provides warehousing of the corrugated blanks until such time that it requires them.



Key to the design of the corrugated trays formed on the Eagle Packaging Machinery *VassoyoAir* trayformer is the way it forms a stable wall when placed atop each other, ensuring safe transport from its Toronto distribution center to its far-reaching global customer base. Notched trays are converted by WestRock.



Venturi vacuum technology automatically pulls carton blanks one at a time from the *VassoyoAir* trayformer’s hopper.



A Nordson ProBlue 10 system sprays a hotmelt adhesive to bond the corrugated trays .



M.L. Catania general manager Neil Catania stands beside the corrugated trays formed on the model *Vassoyo Air* transformer from Eagle Packaging Machinery.

Stesco designed the graphics, and places orders through WestRock, who produce the corrugate, print the box and diecut it to the specific size and shape.

At this point, explains Catania, Stesco warehouses the product, adding that it can be a large quantity owing to the fact that M.L. Catania places daily orders.

“We have a high volume daily output,” notes Catania. “In 2016, we utilized approximately 350,000 trays or cartons.”

He says these WestRock trays are used by Costco stores as retail-ready—the pallet of trays are placed upon the store floor.

Catania continues, “It has some unique features, such as a front flat that folds down once fruit is ready to be placed in it, giving the holding tray a ‘mouth’ to display the fruit, providing the shopping consumer with a great view of the fruit.

“Beyond that,” he adds, “the box has step-up notches on the top and cutouts on the bottom so they can easily interlock on a shipping pallet.”

Even before the filled corrugated trays are strapped to the shipping pallet, “these cases aren’t moving around in the truck,” says Catania. “They are grid-locked in place, meaning we know our fruit will arrive in excellent condition at its destination.”

While the WestRock trays and cartons are provided to M.L. Catania with different graphics per need, it is the same blank used to package lemons, limes and clementines—but easily handles larger-sized fruit such as grapefruit.

“The trays are highly diversified,” Catania relates. “We like them, our customers like them, and so do the consumers.”

He explains that within any high volume work environment, trying to keep costs down is a full-time concern, and is one of the key reasons why the company opted to purchase Eagle Packaging Machinery’s *VassoyoAir* trayformer.



See M.L. Catania video discussing the Eagle Packaging Machinery trayformer on www.eaglepm.com

“It’s a great machine, and we’re being serviced by a great company,” sums up Catania. “It’s a great example of a modern approach with old-world ideals, and that’s what Eagle Packag-ing Machinery was able to bring to the table.”

He continues: “Knowing we have suppliers who share our ideals helps us grow our business the way we want to grow our business.”

For More Information:

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M.L. Catania uses the iconic blue wood pallets from CHEP to load cases of its fruit for delivery to its customers.

“We were looking to try and reduce our labor costs,” says Catania.

Prior to purchasing the *VassoyoAir*, Catania figures it cost \$0.25 to make a single tray by hand.

With the automation brought by the *VassoyoAir*, to erect each tray costs only \$0.05, including costs to run the machine, support costs such as the hot-melt adhesive, hydro and compressed air.

“With the addition of the Eagle Packaging Machinery VassoyoAir trayformer we have reduced our overall assembly costs by 80 per cent per unit,” relates Masellis.

“As well, we believe we now have a much superior box thanks to the consistency and precision provided by the automation technology of the *VassoyoAir*.”

“We are very, very happy with the Eagle Packaging Machinery Vassoyo-Air tray erector,” relates Catania. “Our reduced costs are completely in line with what we had expected from our ROI (return on investment).”

More than that, both Catania and Masellis expressed how impressed they were with the exemplary service provided by the *VassoyoAir*.

“In the future, I can honestly state that should the need arise where we needed a tray former, I would not hesitate to purchase more equipment from Eagle Packaging Machinery,” says Catania.

“Eagle has been great,” he says. “Not only did they oversee the install of the tray former, but they took the time to carefully teach our operators how to effectively use the *VassoyoAir* to get the most out of its automation.”



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