

## **Fresh traditions always growing at Hirzel Canning**

Jessica Hirzel, supply chain manager at Hirzel Canning Company & Farms, is surrounded by family as she seats herself for this interview.

They're not all physically present, you understand — quite a few are otherwise occupied in day-to-day business — but it's impossible to overlook family when ancestral portraits and pictures line the walls of the company conference room.

Founder Carl R. Hirzel is prominent, and Jessica shares the history that spans nearly a century. "Great-grandfather Carl Hirzel began as a brew master, a skill he learned through apprenticeship in Pennsylvania," she says. "However, Prohibition made his abilities in that field less marketable."

Farming seemed a more stable occupation, particularly given the growing family that he and his wife Lena were raising. Northwest Ohio provided a fertile venue for the fresh cabbage crop that he knew would sell well. His entrepreneurial spirit, though, quickly realized that canned sauerkraut would fill a niche that didn't yet exist.

In just three years Carl expanded from sauerkraut sold in wooden kegs and barrels to packaging whole tomatoes in cans. "His philosophy, even that early on, was to pack tomatoes while they were as fresh as possible," Jessica says. "That meant using local produce. Customers responded immediately, and that established a long tradition of working locally."

Today, Hirzel Canning Company augments the output of its own local farm (located in Pemberville, Ohio) with the harvests of more than 30 family growers in northwest Ohio and southeast Michigan. Carl's humble sauerkraut has grown to a global empire of canned vegetables, including the iconic Dei Fratelli line of tomato sauces.

With the team of local growers, half of Hirzel's tomatoes are actually grown within 10 miles of their processing plant — and 75 percent are grown in a 20-mile radius. Not only do the logistics allow for streamlined transport, they mean that the plump, Roma-style tomatoes are as fresh as they can be: from vine to can in just six to 10 hours.

As well as cementing a commitment to producing locally, the ancestral Hirezels laid down deep family loyalties. As Jessica notes, every succeeding generation produced "plenty of family members who were ready to step up and invest their

skills in the company. There were some like an uncle, who brought mechanical abilities that improved the way the tomatoes were processed. There were others who brought their ideas on expanding the product line. All of this brought us successfully into the fifth generation, almost a hundred years later.”

She’s quick to add that admission into the company’s management team “doesn’t happen automatically just because your name is Hirzel. You have to produce; that was another part of Carl’s philosophy, and it’s part of ours today.”

Out of that demand came innovations: an early one was using water to float tomatoes in transit and to unload them for processing with less damage to the fruit. Each succeeding generation brought new inventiveness to meet new challenges, like Hirzel’s fully licensed Ohio EPA Class II composting operation, which in a single year diverted 75 million pounds of organic waste from area landfills.

Social media is another innovation that Hirzel Canning has embraced. Jessica mentions the success of company’s efforts with Facebook and Pinterest, where recipe-sharing is especially popular. “We share the stories behind the food,” Jessica notes. “People want to know where their food comes from, and our local-food philosophy is a great story that resonates.”

Joining the UT Family Business Center was a particular innovation that paid off immediately, says Jessica. “We became participating members back in the 1990s. There’s no other organization that provides connections with other family businesses that we’ve made over the years. As you know, the perspectives of a family business aren’t the same as the perspectives of corporate operations, so we appreciate the stories, the strategies and the experiences of family businesses, whatever their size.”

Asked if Hirzel management act as mentors to other Family Business Center members, Jessica is quick to reply, “We learn just as much from others as they do from us. The affinity groups especially have been great places to learn, plus we have the resources of the university and its faculty.”

Hirzel Canning continues to thrive. Today headed by president and CEO Steve Hirzel, the proudly Ohio company maintains its Northwood plant as well as two food divisions in Pemberville and Ottawa. Approximately 150 employees work full time year-round, the number more than doubling during canning season. Canned sauerkraut is still produced, joined by salsas, pasta sauces, spicy bulk

peppers — and of course, tomatoes in every form: whole, diced, sauced and juiced. Some six million cases of products are shipped annually.

As Jessica notes, public eating habits have changed considerably from a century ago. “People don’t cook at home as much. They do buy our products at grocery stores, but they’re just as likely to be enjoying our tomatoes at a restaurant, or as part of a meal kit that’s delivered to their homes half-prepared. Or they might eat one of our specialty sauces because it appears in a commercial soup.

“As much as possible, we meet the customer where the need is.”

And the future of the Hirzel family where it intersects that of the company? After all, Hirzel Canning Company is one of a select number of family businesses that continue to match financial success with strong family participation into the fifth generation. Jessica speaks for the family when she says, “We’re all still excited about what we’re doing; we work well together, arguments and all. The vision that Carl began still holds us together.

“We’re more than actual relatives, of course. Many of our employees have been with us for years and years, and though they might not be named Hirzel, they feel like family. We’re always on the hunt for employees who come from outside. The same way as with our tomatoes, we’re committed to freshness — and fresh ideas come from outside as well as inside.”