

"AMBITION IS A DREAM WITH A V8 ENGINE."

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SEPTEMBER 2020 | \$10

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Audrey Martel and
Elvis Langevin of
Imperial Snacking

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IMPERIAL RULE

Quebec's popcorn king upgrades its packaging
line technology to pump up the volume

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Frenchcancanpopcorn.com





From Left: Paxiom Group's territory manager for Quebec Charles Meunier and customer service manager Mark Conforti join Imperial Snacking president and chief executive officer Elvis Langevin and operations manager Robert Sylvestre in front of the WeighPack brand XPDIUS Elite vertical form-fill-seal machine supplied to the Saint-Eustache plant by Paxiom to keep up with the additional production volumes for the recently-launched French Cancan line of premium-quality popcorn offered in six tantalizing flavor varieties.

THEIR OWN WEIGH TO ROCK!

Quebec popcorn king breathing new shelf-life into its upscale snack favorites with sturdy and robust automatic bagging machinery

BY GEORGE GUIDONI, EDITOR
PHOTOS BY PIERRE LONGTIN

With bland, generic and easily forgettable pop songs dominating the radio waves and Billboard charts these days, it is always a joy to be reminded that the heart of Rock-and-Roll is still beating out there at full volume—often in the least expected places.

Tucked away in a quiet Montreal off-island suburb of Saint-Eustache, the 80,000-square-foot snack-food manufacturing **Imperial Snacking** facility looks pretty much like any other factory building, until you step through the front door.

Once inside, first-time visitors may well feel like they have stepped inside a Graceland shrine celebrating all things Elvis—just as the company's husband-and-wife team in charge, president and chief executive officer Elvis Langevin and chairwoman of the board of directors Audrey Martel, always meant it to be from Day One.

Named in honor of the original King of Rock-and-Roll by his life-long Elvis Presley devotee parents, living up to the iconic name comes remarkably effortlessly for the 49-year-old entrepreneur gifted with a full diamond smile bright enough to light up





COVER STORY

a room, immaculate pompadour hair straight out of the *Grease* movie set, stylish rockabilly attire, and confident rock-star swagger to match Langevin's high-tempo energy levels and keen business savvy.

For when it comes to the popcorn business, Langevin is literally the king of his domain any way you slice it.

"When he went to accept the Gold Medal Golden Eagle award that our company won at recent industry trade show in Cincinnati, everyone in attendance started yelling for him to sing on stage while accepting the award, and he was happy to oblige, like he always does," recalls Imperial Snacking operations manager Robert Sylvestre, a long-time company employee and a family friend who has known Langevin for over 20 years.

"He loves to sing and entertain people," Sylvestre told *Canadian Packaging* in a recent interview. "He is not shy: he genuinely loves being the life of the party and being in front of people."

"There is never a dull moment with Elvis around."

Originally started up in Ottawa under the **Imperial Concessions** banner back in 1994, Imperial Snacking has been happily earning its bread-and-butter at the Saint-Eustache facility since 1997 by manufacturing home-quality popcorn, cotton candy, slush, and distributing other fun-oriented confectionery products often found at the concession stands at movie theaters, sports arenas, music halls, outdoor festivals and other mainstream entertainment venues.

Also operating a side distribution business to supply concession stand operators with popcorn poppers and dispensers, cotton candy machinery, hot-dog grills, slushie ice-beverage blenders and other portable food preparation equipment, the company's relentless focus on both product and service quality has been rewarded with an extremely loyal client base and brand recognition in the Canadian markets, according to Sylvestre.

This success has also been well replicated in Canada's grocery markets, with leading pharmacy chain **Jean Coutu Group**, supermarkets like **Metro**, **Loblaws**, **Sobeys** and **Dollarama**, and countless convenience stores and other established retailers happy to carry the company's **Mais Soufflé** brand of multiflavored ready-to-eat popcorn in their snack aisles.

Featuring an iconic clown mascot and bright, child-friendly graphics on the surface of the transparent plastic pillow bags in several single-serve and family sizes, the company's **Mais Soufflé** popcorn has been a popular snacking choice for many of the country's kids for the last 20 years, according to Imperial Snacking.

But as market demand for healthier snacking alternatives for children and adults alike has continued to grow rapidly in the last several years, the company saw a unique opportunity to expand its customer base by extending its **Mais Soufflé** line-up with a new brand of premium gourmet-quality popcorn better suited to a more mature audience.

Inspired by music and dance themselves, Audrey and Elvis launched Imperial's **French Cancan** brand as a tribute to the popular cabaret style chorus line dance still popular around France to this day.

Combining personally-driven product innovation with superior packaging execution, the deftly executed new product launch already appears set to raise the bar for the entire product category.

Currently retailing at **Costco** outlets in Quebec, Ontario and Maritimes in family-sized 360- to 698-gram bags, the **French Cancan** line comprises six innovative vegan flavors—including the classic buttery *Movie Style*, *Sweet & Salty*, *Cheddar and Green Onion*, *Jalapeño*, *Himalayan Pink Salt* and *Black Pepper & Lime*—the gourmet-



Imperial Snacking president and chief executive officer Elvis Langevin strikes a cheerful pose in front of palletized loads of large-format bags of French Cancan popcorn packed in attractive retail-ready display packaging and stretchwrapped around the shipping pallets to ensure full load stability and product protection during customer shipment and delivery.



Installed at the mezzanine level, the 14-bucket PrimoCombi automatic weighscale supplied to the Imperial Snacking plant by Paxiom Group delivers superior accuracy and weighing precision in delivering smooth and consistent flow of the lightweight fluffy product to all of the system's vibratory feeder pans and the stainless steel buckets that automatically dispense the precise quantity of product down to the bagging machines on the ground floor below.





The fully-automatic 14-bucket PrimoCombi weighscale at the Imperial Snacking production facility is capably supported by the 360 operating system that enables operators to create reports, event logs, archives or production results, and to provide production analysis to ensure optimized production workflow and production efficiency levels for the busy plant.



Featuring a built-in touchscreen HMI (human-machine interface) near the top of the electronic controls cabinet to provide easy programming and monitoring for machine operators, the WeighPack brand XPDIUS Elite vertical form-fill-seal machine uses specialty metallic foil bags to package the French Cancan line of premium-quality popcorn products at speeds of 10 to 12 bags per minute in perfectly-controlled continuous workflow that ensures nine-month shelf-life for the bagged popcorn.



quality popcorn is made exclusively from top-quality natural ingredients.

Expertly cooked in sunflower oil to produce a full-flavor taste profile, the transfat-, cholesterol- and gluten-free snack offers consumers a tasty and satisfying low-calorie alternative to potato chips, nachos, peanuts and most other traditional snack-foods.

“Popcorn is very much a growing business primarily because of the low-calorie content that both young and older people really appreciate nowadays,” says Sylvestre.

“We go through great lengths to secure only the best-quality grains we can for our products,” he says, “and that’s a very important part of the equation in a highly competitive product category like popcorn.”

Currently processing over three million pounds of popcorn annually, the Imperial Snacking plant runs a busy two-shift operation Monday to Friday, along with additional maintenance shifts for machine and facility cleaning as required by the plant’s HACCP (*Hazardous Analysis Critical Control Points*) compliance requirements for food safety.

Housing a total of five packaging lines, the Saint-Eustache facility has to run like clockwork, Sylvestre contends, to accommodate time-sensitive packaging for a fast-cooking product—requiring less than four minutes of cooking per batch—in order to lock in all the flavor and aroma inside the bags, which vary from 75- to 698-gram volume sizes.

As for product shelf-life, Sylvestre cannot say enough good things about the new metallic foil bags that the company has recently started using for the family-size bags that Imperial Snacking currently supplies to the Costco stores.

Shipped in rollstock by a nearby Quebec-based supplier, the new foil bags literally breathed new life into the products by extending the best-before dates up to nine months, compared to 120 days for the polybags they replaced, without any gas-flushing during packaging.

“We realized that if we could not sell a product over a period of nine months then we had much bigger problems to address,” Sylvestre quips.

As it is, the family-size *French Cancan* bags have already become a brisk-selling product at Costco, Sylvestre confides, and the company is looking forward to then selling the smaller-sized 300-gram and 400-gram bags at other leading grocers across Canada before the year’s end.

Featuring upscale flirtatious graphics and a glamorous cancan dancing girl outfitted in a fancy dress with a popcorn kernel-shaped skirt, the new package design created by Blainville, Que.-based package design specialists **Voyou Bouffe** has helped facilitate a highly successful new product launch.

As Sylvestre explains, the company’s recent investments in some state-of-the-art automatic weighing/scaling equipment and vertical form-fill/seal (VFFS) packaging machinery manufactured by the Montreal-based packaging systems specialists **Paxiom Group** have made Imperial Snacking uniquely qualified to handle processing the bigger volumes required by the plant’s growing private-label business.

Installed over the last couple of years, this new equipment includes the **PrimoCombi** brand multihead combination scale—installed on the mezzanine level—and two high-speed **XPDIUS Elite** VFFS machines installed directly below the scale on the ground floor of the packaging area.

In operation, the bulk popcorn is moved up to the mezzanine level by an inclined bucket elevator convey-



Large family-size bags of French Cancan popcorn being placed inside the retail-ready corrugated display packaging designed for Imperial Snacking by Montreal-based creative agency Boyou Bouffe, which also created the eye-catching graphics, featuring the official logo of Opération Enfant Soleil foundation for assisting sick children in Quebec (inset), expertly printed onto the metallic foil bags used for the brand to achieve vastly extended product shelf-life.

or, and laid on down on the smooth product transfer conveyor belt that directs the product flow to the center cone of the *PrimoCombi* weighscale.

Once filled, the loose popcorn vibrates from the center cone to 14 individual vibratory feeder pans that transport product to the individual weigh buckets—each one controlled by an individual load cell—to be weighed and measured to obtain precise desired quantity of product.

Once weighed, the *PrimoCombi*'s industrial PC determines which buckets equals a near-perfect match, locks the buckets, and then prompts all the filled buckets to release the product at the same time to the *XPDIUS* machines below for bagging and sealing.

Designed for high performance and speedy throughput, the *XPDIUS* vertical bagging machines include twin servomotors and drives for their pull belt assembly and horizontal seal jaws to ensure total control over acceleration, deceleration and positioning of the product, with capability of producing up to 100 bags per minute, depending on the product.

Due to the lightweight and fluffy nature of popcorn that makes it difficult to move and dispense at high speeds, the actual throughput rate for the *XPDIUS* machines at the Saint-Eustache plant currently ranges between 10 and 12 bags per minute, according to Sylvestre.

"We could go twice as fast if we were running heavier solid products through these machines," Sylvestre acknowledges, "but we have to be patient with a tricky

product like popcorn due to its light weight, as running it at full speeds would end up having the loose popcorn fly all over the place, creating unacceptable amounts of waste.

"Of course, minimizing product waste was one of the compelling reasons why we invested in Paxiom's WeighPack brand of machinery to begin with."

Says Sylvestre: "Back in the days when we used to fill the bags manually by hand, we would inevitably end up putting an extra 30 to 50 grams of extra popcorn into the bags just to ensure that we would not be short-changing the customer on the amount of product per bag.

"Having the *CombiPrimo* has enabled us to reduce this product giveaway down to a couple of grams of product per bag at the most," he states. "It is a highly accurate, precise and versatile system that is a perfect match for our operation's uncompromising emphasis on quality and customer satisfaction."

As for the *XPDIUS* Elite VFFS bagging machines, Sylvestre says he highly values the equipment's durable construction and reliability, along with general user-friendliness and ease of maintenance.

"We run these machines for up to 19 hours per day in a very challenging environment," he says, "and so far they have proven to be exceptionally reliable."

"We have maintained a very productive relationship with the Paxiom Group for several years," says Sylvestre, adding that the horizontal form/fill/seal machines used on the other packaging lines at the plant were also



Imperial Snacking's power couple of Audrey Martel and Elvis Langevin sharing a light moment while posing for a picture inside their company plant's reception area with the new family-size bags of French Cancan brand popcorn.

supplied to Imperial Snacking by the Paxiom Group.

"Their local customer service manager Mark Conforti is an extremely knowledgeable guy who has provided great advice and service for us," Sylvestre adds, "which give us a lot of confidence going forward to grow our popcorn business—both for our own brands and the new private-label business that we are working with to bring to our plant to really maximize our full potential.

Adds Conforti: "Working with the Team at Imperial Snacking has truly been a pleasure.

"We were able to work together as a team, and as a team we developed a packaging system that best suits Imperial Snacking's specific needs in order deliver a high-quality product and packaging to the marketplace.

"Upon arrival for the commissioning of the equipment at Imperials facility, everything was already in place and ready for us to hit the ground running," Conforti recalls. "Within a couple of hours we had the system producing great quality-pouches ready be displayed at major grocery chains across Canada."

As Sylvestre happily concurs: "Popcorn is a really fun and happy product to work with, and having a loyal, dedicated, skillful and happy workforce, using the best equipment we can get for them to work with, provides a happy work culture and environment to form a very strong foundation for all the future business growth to come." 🍁



Please see the *CombiPrimo* weighscale and the *XPDIUS Elite* vertical form/fill/seal machine in action at the Imperial Snacking manufacturing facility on Canadian Packaging TV at www.canadianpackaging.com

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