



A chip off the old ... chip

Frito-Lay plant celebrates 30 years in Charlotte

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For years, Lay's potato chip ads bet customers that they couldn't eat just one. Today, Frito-Lay's Charlotte manufacturing plant churns out 120 million pounds of salty snacks a year – 42 million of those pounds are chips.

The 325,000-square-foot plant is celebrating its 30th anniversary. Known for keeping its factories under lock and key, Frito-Lay rarely allows journalists to enter the Charlotte facility. The company made an exception for South Charlotte Weekly, to celebrate both its anniversary and July Fourth, one of America's favorite holidays for enjoying the savory snacks.

The Nevada Boulevard plant employs about 500 workers. It's the fifth-largest Lay's plant in the country, part of Plano, Texas-based Frito-Lay North America's \$12 billion company, which is owned by PepsiCo.

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Community

Lay's

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But the crispy end product is only part of the process. It takes 25 minutes for a potato to make the journey from the truck to the bag. Sometimes a potato can come out of the ground in the morning and end up in a bag of potato chips by nightfall. The process involves hundreds of workers and thousands of potatoes.

From the ground

Frito-Lay works with 80 growers in 27 states. Last year, North Carolina farmers grew more than 66 million pounds of potatoes for Lay's chips. One of those farmers is Jimmy Harrell, president of George Wood Farms in Camden County, N.C. Harrell has farmed for about 50 years and has worked at George Wood Farms for about 40 years.

"Frito-Lay has been here through the years; they're a good receiver," Harrell said. "We could increase our acreage because of our contracts with Frito-Lay."

He added, "It's been an ace in the hole for us to be able to depend on that

every day. You don't have to go look for other customers."

Harrell said that 75 percent of the chipping potatoes grown on the farm go to Frito-Lay. George Wood Farms also grows for a couple of smaller chip companies, and the rest of the potatoes are "table potatoes" for open markets and supermarkets.

However, he's been able to depend on Frito-Lay, which also provides the trucks that transport the potatoes from Camden County to Charlotte.

"They tell you at the start of the week how many loads they want. It's a good source of supply that we can depend on delivering," Harrell said. "That way your potatoes don't get old."

Even with the economy, Harrell said he hasn't seen a decrease from Frito-Lay. "They say during tough times the two commodities that don't change are potato chips and beer," Harrell said with a laugh.

"The Frito-Lay people are very good people to deal with, and I feel honored to be one of the oldest growers that they have," Harrell said. "They treat you fairly."

To the plant

The potatoes are loaded off of the truck into one of six bins, each of which holds 45,000 pounds of potatoes. From there they're inspected, washed, peeled, sliced, washed in natural oils, cooked, salted, sometimes flavored and bagged.

Matt Schiefelbein is the plant's manufacturing manager. He's been with Frito-Lay for 13 years and has been at the Charlotte plant for more than a year.

His favorite thing about working for Frito-Lay is the people who comprise the company. "Every site has its own culture," he explained.

Much more than just its people, Frito-Lay's commitment to quality and reducing the company's carbon footprint make it an award-winning organization, Schiefelbein said. In its 30-year history, the Charlotte plant has won numerous awards, several for sustainability.

"We put a lot of effort into reducing our (carbon) footprint," Schiefelbein said.

Frito-Lay's Sun Chips, which also are made at the Charlotte plant, come in a bag that is one-third compostable. The company is working to make the entire

bag compostable by next year.

Frito-Lay also uses solar energy at some of its plants, including a 5-acre solar panel farm used at the Modesto, Calif. plant. "(We're) not only providing great brands, but improving those brands," Schiefelbein said.

To you

While many might appreciate the company's global efforts, for most it comes down to that crispy crunch every time they crack open a fresh bag. Frito-Lay launched a campaign in May to help consumers appreciate just how local most of its snacks are. Every Frito-Lay chip bag now features a "chip tracker." Consumers can visit Lays.com, enter their ZIP codes and the first three digits of the product codes on their bags, and see where the chips they're eating were made. The exercise often proves that even in snacking, it's a small world after all.

"While Lay's potato chips have been one of the most popular snacks since they were introduced, what people might not realize is how many communities

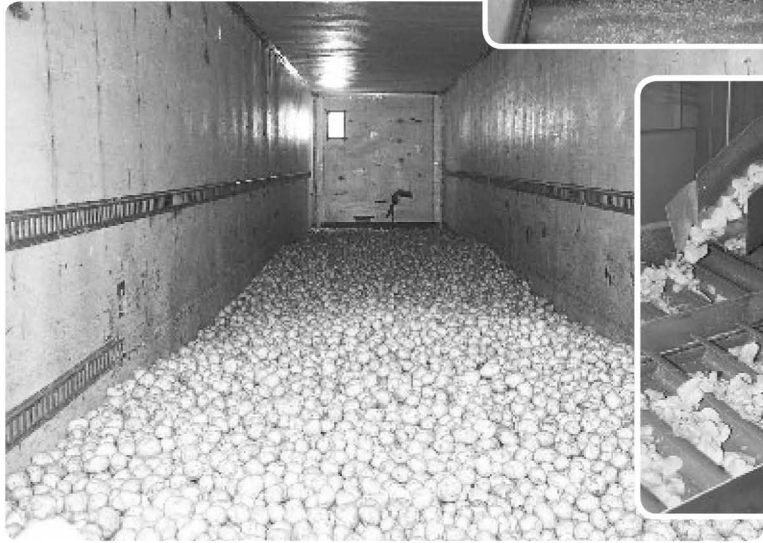
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across the country play a role in the creation of America's favorite potato chip," Dave Skena, Frito-Lay North America's vice president of potato chip marketing, said in a statement. "The truth is we are closer to home than people might expect, and we felt it was only fitting to put the spotlight on these people and communities and celebrate the contributions they've made to the Lay's brand."

After 30 years, the Charlotte plant has the process down to a snack-filled science. □



A new Frito-Lay initiative started this spring stresses the local origins of its products. Here in Charlotte, the journey isn't far. The company's Queen City plant on Nevada Boulevard is celebrating its 30th anniversary churning out some of America's favorite salty and savory chips. The factory employs approximately 500 people, taking rough potatoes and fashioning them into crispy chips in roughly 25 minutes per batch.

Carolyn Steeves/SCW photos