



The Portuguese caviar

Alex Fordham recently visited Comur, the Portuguese sardine company, which still skins and de-bones its sardines by hand. With an emphasis on single product concepts, the company believes there is potential for innovation in this sector by focusing on high product quality, leading to a high-end price

Fish canning in Portugal has a rich heritage stretching back well over 100 years. In the past, over 400 canneries have operated in Portugal, with of course the Portuguese sardine being the queen of the region's seafood. However, presently there are only 14 factories left in the entire country, which is ultimately due to a systematic mismanagement of strategy based on keeping the price of fish low, according to Comur director, Tiago Quaresma.

"When we bought our canned fish factory three years ago, there were 16 canneries in Portugal, but that's already down to 14," he says. "Right now if things don't change that will be down to just one or two. Currently the strategy of this industry is all wrong; it's just low price, low price, low price."

"That's a terrible mistake – sardines in Portugal

are the best in the world, so we have the quality – the added value is ours. History proves us correct as 100 years ago nearly all the factories were owned by the French. They used to build the factories here as we had the best fish. The same thing happens today – the fish is canned here then sent abroad. All the added value stays abroad and not here; it's the classical mistake of our industry.

"We have the quality, but the company haven't known how to sell it. The biggest mistake was trying to compete with Morocco; we didn't need to compete with them; they have their own segment, which is based on low price and high volume. We shouldn't start this war; we shouldn't talk about them as that price war is what we are trying to escape from."

"We don't need to do that much; we don't need millions of cans. We need fewer cans, better ►

quality and higher prices.”

Since 1942 Comur has been one of the flag-bearers of the Portuguese national canned food industry. Initially the Comur factory in Murtosa was devoted to canned eel exportation, but production evolved to other types of canned fish. Comur has subsequently moved production to its current location on the outskirts of Aveiro, but it's the purchase of the company by the O Valor Do Tempo group that has seen a marked shift in business strategy. O Valor Do Tempo, meaning 'Value of time', has a company motto of 'Added Value', which underlines the company's core ethos during the past three years.

To highlight the influence of this umbrella group, the company has a number of businesses within its portfolio including seven different sardine shops in tourist hotspots throughout the country, a canned eel shop and a codfish cake shop in Lisbon. In addition to this, the company owns the Museum of Beer in Lisbon and the Portuguese Museum of Bread and factory in the northwest of the country.

For Comur, the past three years have seen a significant change in marketing strategy. “We believe in a single product concept,” explains Quaresma. “Our shops for both sardines and eels across Portugal attractively showcase our canned food in a striking market for consumers.

“Our shops are a Disneyland environment, where we make the prodigy of the Atlantic even more appetising, through a differentiated marketing approach.”

Cleverly, cans have been created for each of the years Comur have been in production. There is a base colour for each decade, with an interesting fact on each can to draw in the consumer

Comur's shop in the heart of Lisbon



when looking to purchase a memento for a holiday, or a gift idea for relatives. It's this targeted marketing approach, along with shops in prominent locations in a fun environment, that has opened up a new revenue stream for the brand.

“Portuguese people don't eat canned sardines, they eat fresh ones,” notes Quaresma. “Who eats canned ones? Foreigners. Foreigners know how good it is and are prepared to buy expensive ones. Our main goal is to give it importance and fame.

“In the shops we are selling the cans for seven euros, that's seven times more than in supermarkets – we sell more cans per day than the Portuguese supermarkets too. It proves it's not about price but how you present it.”

Although the marketing strategy has caused a dramatic shift recently, the essence of the production process has largely remained unchanged throughout the company's 75-year history. With efficiency and technological innovation buzzwords within the industry, it's particularly refreshing to see a different approach which prides itself on the quality of the product first and foremost.

“It's been the same way for 75 years, it would be cocky of us to change the process,” says Quaresma. “Why be the same as everyone else – to modernise production and change machines is not for us.”

PRODUCTION PROCESS

CanTech International was granted exclusive access to Comur's factory in Aveiro, a city on the west coast of Portugal. Here a workforce, mostly women, were working by skinning and de-boning the fish by hand – a real work of art. Comur's manager, Nuno Pauseiro explains to *CanTech* how socially the canning industry is particularly important for Portuguese families in the region.

“Socially this industry is very important for Portugal, particularly in seaside areas, and the family is divided in two,” says Pauseiro. “The men go fishing, the women go to the factory. There are about 100 women working in the factory, which is important as the salaries of the husbands are not certain. Sometimes it may be the only salary coming in from those houses.

“The women working in the factory are mostly Portuguese nationals – we even have three generations of women from the same family. Our oldest employee has worked here for 58 years – it's a way of life.”

When the fish arrives into the factory it is separated into fresh and frozen. Fresh occurs from September to December, and the rest of the year is for frozen. Once the fish is separated, the frozen is sent to machines to be unfrozen and then the fish is steamed. From here the fish heads are cut, tails off and the bones removed carefully. Afterwards the fish goes to a special place to cook. The fish is then canned (produced by Crown),

steamed and sterilised for 30 minutes at 120 degrees. For eels, it's essentially the same process, but it has to have been unfrozen and then fried.

Once the bones are removed, the fish is then cut to the correct size and the olive oil added to the process (this is the only automotive process). The company has three seamers to seam the product and then the product is sterilised for 30 minutes to ensure safety. The final washing occurs to complete the process. Comur has three lines – one for eels and two for sardines – all of which are handpicked.

Due to this specialised handpicked process, the company is keen to promote itself as the best in terms of quality, and that means exclusivity: “We believe of course that Portuguese sardines are the best in world – we want to look at it in the future as the Portuguese caviar,” says Quaresma. “It takes a special way to make it caviar like, to take the skin and bones out of the sardine by hand, it's the only way you can do it properly.”


Although a closely guarded secret, Comur has undertaken plans with Crown to create a very high-end sardine product that brings this vision of Portuguese caviar to fruition. In production for the previous two years, the product intends to draw on this exclusivity and raise the sardine from purely being seen as a cheap and disposable canned product that is sold for a euro or less. The



We need fewer cans, better quality and higher prices

Tiago Quaresma and Nuno Pauseiro

new product is expected to retail around the 100 euro mark and is expected by the end of 2017.

For Quaresma, this exclusivity will help the fisherman of Portugal: “The best way for fisherman to live well, is to sell cans at a higher price,” he notes. “The solution is to make them more expensive. The more we can pay fisherman, the less they will have to fish – so everyone profits.” 



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