

Food Manufacture Feature



FEATURE

Nuts about pistachios

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The man who heads up Zeina Foods tells Rod Addy the history of how he grew his business to a £12M turnover firm and what his plans are for the future

SAAFA ALI, MD, ZEINA FOODS, OSSETT

"This site was found by local agents. It was a design and build by the previous owner and we chose it for its proximity to the motorway. We built an extension three years ago, which we sometimes use for repalletising, manual labelling or storage.

We usually use two-thirds of the site for storage and one third for manufacturing. We can store up to 150t of raw material on our mezzanine level. We plan to incorporate a bigger area for finished goods and a bay for loading and unloading.

We supply everything from 1t bags for processors to 30g retail packs. We can clean raw material for third parties and are organic approved by the Soil Association.

We have a quality control laboratory, where we test incoming raw materials, materials in process and finished product for moisture, salt content and sensory aspects, such as taste, appearance and size.

We have a computer-based Zeiss quality management system that keeps tabs on everything. We can trace pistachios from the factories where they were shelled in Iran and from before they were shelled.

The price of nuts in general has gone up in the past few years. Although pistachios will come down again when we get the new crop in October, it's not going to be a big drop, because demand has grown. China is now a bigger consumer than Europe. Three years ago, a certain grade of Californian pistachio was \$5,700/t. It's now \$11,000/t from origin.

We have one packaging line, two roasting lines and a pre-sorting line before roasting for pistachios going to high-spec customers, where they go through sieving and foreign matter separation. We have a maximum threshold of five pieces of shell per tonne, but we aim at zero. We also use hand sorting for high spec items. Nuts are also processed through a flavour applicator before roasting, by hand for delicate flavouring or mechanically for continuous batch processing.

These days, there's more of a tendency to go for a healthy way of roasting oven roasting, rather than dipping in oil. We are now able to spray controlled amounts of oil on nuts.

We are always challenging the flavour houses to come up with better flavours, looking for more spices and herbs to give them more flavour and impact.

In our new product development (NPD) lab, we look at flavouring, mixing and roasting levels, which we simulate before transferring to bigger batches. We installed a new oven about six months ago to give us more accurate NPD samples that replicate what we can do in the factory.

We use an Ishida multi-head weigher for retail packaging, which can handle anything from 60g to 1kg, with online printers.

I set up a business importing pistachios into the UK in January 1983 when I was 23 years old, after graduating from Leeds University as a textile processing engineer. My family had a factory in Lebanon, but the early 1980s were times of great turmoil, so I didn't see myself progressing there. I had just come across pistachios in Iran as one of the leading exports. I did some market research and realised there was not adequate coverage of that market in the UK.

I started exporting hundreds of kilos and was able to contact suppliers in Iran through family contacts. We're a family firm and three of our family are directors. I quickly felt we could be going into bigger volumes, because demand was growing for Iranian pistachios. Within six months we were taking orders in excess of one tonne from premises in Horbury Bridge, Wakefield.

We were selling pistachio kernels mainly, to firms such as ethnic sweetmakers. We had to link up with processors that could roast pistachios in their shells to give them the right texture and flavour and we worked with household names in the nut category.

At the time, most processors were spraying them with salt before roasting them. My idea was to totally submerge them as a way of covering more of the nut with salt. During Christmas especially, everybody focused on their own supply chain, so I realised we weren't really going to be successful unless we had our own processing.

By 1987, we were supplying hundreds of tonnes mainly to the ethnic cash and carry market and our line could process about three quarters of a tonne per hour. We were handling in excess of 2,000,000t a year and were able to book the price forward for three to six months. We believe we were the first to have an all-in-one processing line for pistachios, from cleaning and visual inspection to washing, drying, roasting and packing.

In 1988, we put in a fruit washing line for dates and sultanas supplied from Iran for people who wanted to put them into muesli or cakes. We moved to this 2,230sqm site in 1991 when volumes grew.

Having installed a new processing line, we gradually grew capacity from three quarters of a tonne an hour to 3.5t an hour. The reason for our success has been our versatility we were able to respond very quickly to customer demand and could turn around orders in two or three days.

In 1997, we took a great hit because of the aflatoxin scare affecting Iranian pistachios especially only this year were EU tolerance levels for aflatoxin in pistachios revised upwards. This led to us becoming less dependent on Iranian pistachios and we looked for different suppliers, including California, which is the second largest grower and exporter of pistachios.

It took until 2002/2003 for California pistachios to start growing more in demand because of the aflatoxin scare. Even then, two or three big high street names were still insisting on Iranian pistachios. All this made us realise we could not be a single commodity company, although pistachios do remain our main turnover.

The next milestone was developing branded products, which we did three years ago. They represent about 10% of our total turnover now and I would like to see them grow to about 30% or 40%.

We felt we could grow by bringing in more ethnic lines, such as Baklava or stuffed dates. We chose Syrian pistachios for the Baklava. They are high in flavour and, because they are harvested early, they are safer for aflatoxins, which are a problem for nuts exposed to high moisture and temperature levels for a long time. We are not processing Baklava, but it is something we are considering. We tentatively pitched a 1.5kg pack of sweet pastries to a retailer. They didn't go with us, but if it's not one supermarket, it will be another.

We concentrate now on higher quality, niche products in small volumes for foodservice, cash and carry and retail channels, although if a supermarket came to me for a line, we could look at that"

Interview by Rod Addy

Factory Facts

Location: Zeina Foods, Zeina House, Milner Way, Ossett, West Yorkshire, WF5 9JE. Tel: 01924 280180

Staff: 25 full-time, plus agency workers

Operating hours: It varies 8am-5pm five to six days a week, depending on sales orders

Products: About 60 lines. Bulk roasted and salted tree nuts and roasted no salt; flavoured lines for wholesalers and retailers; raw ingredients for baking, biscuits, confectionery and ice cream; the Zeina Love our Food brand of raw, roasted salted, flavoured and fruit and nut mixes; own label UK and EU products

Output: 2,500t a year of roasted and roasted salted pistachios

Turnover: £12m a year

Personal

Name: Saafa Ali

Age: 53

Career highlights: *"Establishing the Zeina Love our Food brand; becoming the largest importer of pistachios into the UK; gaining a reputation for being the UK's leading reference on pistachios."*

Domestic: *"Married, with four children, aged 19, 21, 25 and 27."*

Outside work: *"I enjoy working in the local community, supporting local charities, spending time with my family and travelling."*