



# Apples of their eye: Packing plant near Kentville at full throttle

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Flatbed trucks lined with wooden bins rumble down the road past rows of apple trees and slowly pull into the lot at **Van Meekeren Farms Ltd.** outside Kentville.

They come one at a time, straight from other apple farms down the way, and are quickly but carefully unloaded to get those apples into one of the many cold storage rooms at the Lakeville packing plant.

It's midway through the fall apple harvest season and the packing plant is in full swing.

“On a really good day, we can do, say, a thousand of these bushels, so one tractor-trailer load comes out at the end of the day,” Michael Van Meekeren, the company's vice-president, said during a recent tour of the farm.

Inside the packing room at the farm, a small whiteboard tells workers what types of apples are to be processed. Today is Honeycrisp day.

Water is used to float the apples gently out of the bins, and the water nudges the mass of apples, bobbing up and down, along the packing line.

The mostly red fruit passes through a chlorine cleanser and a potable water rinse and is dried before passing under a light mist of vegetable-based edible wax.

All this is done under the watchful eye of two plant workers — one looks for imperfections and bruises on the fruit while the other looks for streaks or bubbles in the glossy wax finish.

About 20 people work in the packing plant and about 20 people work the 120 acres (roughly 50 hectares) of apple orchards owned by the Van Meekeren family.

The family's links to the land date back to 1964 when Frank Van Meekeren bought the farm property. It's there where he raised a family and grew vegetables, apples and other fruit, which he sold door to door.

He taught the brothers about the importance of relationships with the growers, buyers and customers and having a quality product.

"He wanted us to make sure we never lost sight of that," said Stephen Van Meekeren, the company's president and Michael's older brother.

A parking lot is at the site of the old homestead and Frank's sons Stephen and Michael run the farm and company.

They still grow in the orchards but most of the trees are grown trellis-style, attached to wires to make way for more trees per acre, faster maturity and easier access to the fruit come harvest time.

They've introduced a number of newer varieties to keep up with the changing tastes of customers, who are not only in Canada but across the U.S., Europe and China. They also buy from local growers and have invested in improved storage.

With the implementation of newer technology, they have decreased oxygen levels in the many atmospheric cold storage rooms, which can hold about 6,000 bushels, from 2.5 per cent down to 0.05 per cent. That means the apples stay firmer, crunchier, fresher and tastier much longer so customers around the world can have "good-quality Nova Scotia apples all year-round," Stephen said.

Back on the packing floor of the 15,000-square-foot facility, a machine takes digital pictures of each Honeycrisp apple.

It scans the fruit first for the perfect colour — if it's too green or there's not enough red covering the skin of the apple, that's not a premium Honeycrisp, Michael said.

"Consistency is a big thing for us. Every time, the box of apples needs to look the same. You can't get humans to do it because you'll have an opinion, 'I think they're red enough,' and somebody else says, 'Throw that away.' It's all done on this machine."

The machine also weeds out apples with imperfections. Those with bruises and dents make their way off the packing line and into bins destined for baking facilities or juice makers.

It also sorts the remaining apples by grade — the bigger, the redder, the better. In fact, a premium apple fetches about five to 10 per cent more than a regular apple, the Van Meekerens said.

But there's a market for even the smallest mature apple.

"We call them minis," Stephen said, pointing to a tray with apples small enough to fit in the palm of a toddler's hand.

"They go to daycares and nursery schools and stuff like that. We don't get many mini Honeycrisp, but other varieties we do."

For the Honeycrisp alone, there are 50 different grades in total. With so much demand, there is very little waste when it comes to this variety, the brothers say.

The bigger apples go in the boxes and smaller ones in the bags, and are inspected by workers as they are packaged for shipping.

These grown-in-Nova Scotia apples end up all over the world, but primarily on grocery store shelves in Canada, meaning the brothers get to see the fruits of their labour right at home.

Success, the brothers said, is in knowing you're feeding people good, tasty, healthy food.

"When you see people enjoy what you've grown ... times like that are really rewarding as well as just seeing the quality on the shelf, walking through the store or a market," Michael said. "Just seeing it stand up and look beautiful, I think that's extremely rewarding."

## **NOVA SCOTIA APPLE SECTOR FACTS**

- The first apple trees in Nova Scotia were planted by the Acadians in the early 1600s.
- There are more than 60 commercial apple growers and 2,000 hectares of orchards in Nova Scotia.
- The province supplies about 10 per cent of the country's apple crop, with more than 20 commercial varieties grown.
- Honey Crisp continues to grow in popularity, and look for the new variety called Pazazz.