

Local Growth: Mrs. Gerry's Kitchen

Mrs. Gerry's Kitchen achieves national market share and 43-year legacy in Albert Lea, MN; refers to community as "Family".



INTRO

Mrs. Gerry's Kitchen is a food manufacturing company located in Albert Lea, Minnesota. They produce a variety of salads and side dishes in their 214,500 sq. ft. facility in the Northaire Industrial Park. Their products are sold across the United States including Hawaii and Alaska and are popular in retail grocery stores, and are served in restaurants, universities, healthcare facilities and more.

HISTORY

Mrs. Gerry's Kitchen (Mrs. Gerry's) began in 1973 when Mr. Jerry Vogt came home to Mrs. Gerry Vogt and asked her to make salads to complement the meat sold on his sales route to grocery stores. After praying about it that evening, Gerry awoke with a peace, and decided to seize the opportunity. Work started immediately and Mrs. Gerry's Kitchen was born. Using family recipes, Mrs. Gerry made salads to be sold on her husband's sales route and soon they expanded to serve several additional routes in Minnesota. Not long after

that, they landed their first major grocery client, Supervalu, and to this day they remain their largest and oldest customer.

In the beginning, the salads were made at the home of "The Gerry's" (as the locals affectionately call them) but soon production demanded more space and the first plant was purchased on the south side of Albert Lea. With just 1,100 square feet, and the first two employees, Gerry's mother and father, they began producing product in their own factory. Their equipment was limited and consisted of two stoves, a sink, and a cooler. In 1974 Gerry's sister joined the team and that year 70,000 lbs. of salad was produced entirely by hand.

Potatoes may no longer be peeled by hand, but the process is still done in batches, with every care taken to ensure the highest quality product possible. To this day, the recipe for Original Potato Salad is still true to the family recipe.

EXPANSIONS

Mrs. Gerry's has grown and expanded several times since 1973. In 1979, they built a new 14,000 square foot building in the Northaire Industrial Park, their current location. In 1983, an additional 10,000 square feet was added to facilitate a larger dressing and salad mixing station, cabbage shredding, pasta cooking, a walk-in freezer, and storage. Two loading docks were also added during this expansion.

Three years later, a second addition of 9,000 square feet was added to provide larger refrigerated space for potatoes and cabbage. A packaging line was added to accommodate the production of several flavors of gelatin in ring molds (eventually discontinued). The cabbage shredding process was later moved to this area, where it remains today. In 1990, a third addition expanded the plant size by 5,000 square feet. This area was used for more storage of packaging and non-refrigerated ingredients.

A fourth addition in 1994 added 25,000 square feet bringing the total square footage to 63,000. This addition provided a larger cooler for finished salads, four loading docks for shipping, and a 1,600 square foot freezer. With this addition some re-arranging was done and the garage area that had been added in 1983 was remodeled to become more office space.

The fifth addition of 22,000 square feet was added in 2002 and was built to increase peeling and cooking capacity for potato salad, expand storage area for non-refrigerated ingredients and packaging, refrigerated space for bulk ingredients, and to give additional space for packaging smaller containers.

In 2012, an additional 36,000 square feet was added to increase the finished product cooler area, storage for packaging materials, and two more loading docks for finished salad

shipment. The addition also accommodated the remodeling of space to add salad prep and packaging areas, a larger freezer, and a potato peeling room for mashed potato production.

Mrs. Gerry's most recent addition, in 2015, added 93,000 square feet to the building. The additional space was added to increase the capacity for side dish production, which includes mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese. Bulk potato storage bins were added, along with a truck dump, state-of-the-art processing line, chiller, and more. Eight additional loading docks were also added providing shipping capability within a cooled staging area. An area of this addition remains unfinished and ready to accommodate future needs as the business continues to grow.

Mrs. Gerry's Original Potato Salad remains one of their best selling products, but has been surpassed by their mashed potatoes. With over 200 employees, they produce 35 million pounds of product annually and offer 120 products. These products include side dishes, coleslaws, desserts, dips, salad kits, pasta salads, potato salads, specialty, and seasonal items.

PARTNERSHIPS

Mrs. Gerry's partnerships with local producers allows them to source approximately 80% of ingredients locally (300-mile radius). Approximately 20 years ago, Mrs. Gerry's encouraged a local potato farm in Hollandale, MN (which has some of the world's best peat dirt for growing potatoes) to invest in a storage facility that could control humidity and temperature – yielding a longer storage life. At that time, the peak season for Mrs. Gerry's was summertime when the demand for potato salads was at its highest. However, the majority of the potatoes are harvested in the fall, limiting the amount of potatoes Mrs. Gerry's could purchase in the summer. After the creation of the climate controlled facility, Mrs. Gerry's was able to purchase about 40% more potatoes from the local farm and in turn were able to reduce freight. They also purchase other ingredients as locally as possible, such as pasta, cabbage and other vegetables.

In 2016, they processed 21.8 million potatoes much of which were sourced from Hollandale. Over 13 million potatoes were utilized for potato salad production while 8 million potatoes met their fate with the masher. It took much effort and collaboration to create the strong partnership that stands today; the company takes pride in its support of local producers.

As a large company in Albert Lea, Mrs. Gerry's partners with other local businesses to fill it's needs. As Chad Vogt, CEO, explained,

“There was once a sense that if you needed professional services, you had to find a company in the Twin Cities to do business with, but that’s not the case. You can find what you need here from other local companies, and we consistently try to do that.”

Mrs. Gerry’s has cultivated vital relationships internally and externally as well. They attribute much of their company success to their sense of family within their business, among their employees, and within their community. When asked to comment on the culture, Chad Vogt said, "It can be summed up in one word: family."

Management attributes employee longevity and morale to the company's family culture; the company wants to see each employee succeed and strives to cultivate talent by promoting from within. The longevity of Mrs. Gerry's Kitchen employees is a testament to their culture; several of the current employees have been with the company 30+ out of 43 years.

Mrs. Gerry’s Kitchen has an exemplary focus on community as well. Their continual commitment to giving is evidenced through donations to local food shelves, donations to community fundraisers and benefits, and to local projects.

Community partners appreciate the support and have provided reciprocating efforts by continually investing time and energy into the success of Mrs. Gerry's Kitchen and other manufacturing facilities in the area. This is evidenced through the partnership of the City of Albert Lea, Freeborn County, the Shell Rock River Watershed District, and Albert Lea Economic Development Agency (ALEDA) in construction of a 1.5 million gallon holding pond designed and implemented to accommodate the needs of Mrs. Gerry's Kitchen as well as other manufacturers nearby. This project’s cost was over \$600, 000 and involved financing through the State of Minnesota and Shell Rock River Watershed District through grants, and the City of Albert Lea through TIF financing. These efforts in establishing the retention pond enabled Mrs. Gerry’s to expand their facility and parking lot. Area agencies and business owners are committed to assisting one another in the growth of the local economy and in improving the quality of life for the workforce.

The original production facility, which started with just 14,000 square feet, has now expanded to cover over 200,000 square feet in the original site location; proving that Albert Lea, MN is a great place to start and grow a business.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Albert Lea is known for its leadership’s ability to pull together resources and collaborate on projects that improve the community and lead to greater growth. The local organizations that enable this growth; Albert Lea Economic Development Agency (ALEDA), City of Albert

Lea, Freeborn County, and the Albert Lea – Freeborn County Chamber Commerce work together to support the local business community and to help new companies grow and claim Albert Lea as their home.

When asked about ALEDA's effectiveness in helping Mrs. Gerry's with expansion projects Chad Vogt stated, "They gave me every option in their arsenal to get me where I needed to be."

Albert Lea's rich history of long standing companies and commitment to business growth can be traced back to the collaboration of the businessmen who created the Jobs Industrial Park in south Albert Lea. This park was the first community-owned industrial park in the United States and was started after World War II to draw in new industry to provide job opportunities for our returning soldiers.

This community collaboration approach to economic growth remains today and offers businesses the opportunity to leverage these strengths to grow their own legacies in Albert Lea.