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## Salad Days

### A eye-opening trip to St. Clair Foods.

By BO LIST

Mom and Dad never told me where potato salad comes from. I just assumed that, like babies and Vlasic pickles, the stork was somehow responsible. But while touring St. Clair Foods with Brian Edmonds, the vice president of operations, I discover an awesome fact of life: The preferred item of my workplace lunches — Schnucks-brand mustard potato salad — is conceived right here in this nondescript warehouse on the Elvis side of town.

"We manufacture various food salads," Edmonds tells me as we tour the factory's departments. "Cole slaw, chicken salad, potato salad. We put together carrot sticks and celery sticks. And we make frozen foods, side dishes like chicken and dumplings and broccoli, rice, and cheese casserole."

Some offerings end up in grocery stores; others are found on the menus of Memphis' best-known restaurants.

St. Clair is a family affair, with Edmond's sister, Lauren, serving as a product developer and father, Oscar H. Edmonds, as president and CEO. Edmonds the elder bought the company in 1976 and has since grown the business, which ships its products as far as Ohio, Texas, Florida, and the Carolinas.

"Dad was what you might call a 'shade-tree mechanic' of the food industry," Edmonds says of his father's earliest days in the condiment trenches of St. Clair. "Our business was built on the idea that the customer will buy quality. We use butter because we like butter. We use sugar when we like it better than corn syrup."

I insist on seeing the potato-salad-making process, and Edmonds obliges. But first, I must suit up in white lab coat and hairnet.

The first step in the tater-salad process is the arrival of potatoes by the ton. An accumulator/conveyor belt picks up the potatoes from their Idaho-stamped cardboard bins and takes them to a giant pressure cooker, where the skins literally *explode* off of the potato. The spuds continue through steam and brush peeling, and then two nice ladies — Lan and Thu — cut out the visible flaws, work that Edmonds informs me will one day be done by infrared machines.

Humans replaced by robots? Edmonds assures me that other tasks will be found for Lan and Thu, who wave us away with a smile.

"In the early '80s, we started working with Catholic Charities of Memphis toward employing refugees from Asian countries," Edmonds tells me. "When they got here, one of the first jobs we had them do

was put carrot sticks into bags. They'd work hard to stack them very neatly side by side and on top of each other, like bricks.

"One day my father tells them to stop it — that it's a waste of time and that they should just dump them into a pile. Well, customers started calling and complaining because they wanted their bricks back!"

But back to that potato salad: Unflawed and cooked, the potatoes continue on to the coolest part: the cooling. "The cooking of the potato is nothing special," Edmonds explains. "But the way we cool it is very interesting. We use a vacuum. You know how you blow on a Coke bottle — you hear that 'whoop' sound? We cool the potatoes like that, moving high-pressure steam over an opening in the container holding the potatoes. The steam moves so fast, it sucks the heat out. Like in space — the potato would freeze solid because of the vacuum in space."

The potato pieces are then mixed in with the relish and salad dressing, and the process is repeated to the tune of 20 million pounds of potato salad annually. Another 10 to 20 million pounds of other St. Clair products also are made each year. Translation: 90 to 100 million servings for the consumer.

I ask what's in store for St. Clair's future.

"Steady, controlled growth," Edmonds tells me. "If you do not grow, you die. But if you grow too fast, that can be just as dangerous."

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