



Taking the humble potato to a new high

Merino Industries has come a long way since it established its factory in Hapur in 2005. Its Vegit Aloo Mash became an instant hit with institutions and consumers. But it branched out to innovate and today has a whopping list of nine snack mixes that are not only quick to prepare but traditional. — **A report.**

Potato, a "versatile raw material" has, with innovation, been turned into a magical product by Merino Industries. Led by Prakash Lohia, Managing Director, Merino Industries has created innovative quality products for the institutional and consumer market, some of them, Vegit Corn Cutlet, Vegit Halwa, Vegit Sabudana Vada and Vegit Falafel, were showcased at the recently concluded Aahar 2014. Merino started production of potato flakes in 2004-05. Since then, its institutional customers' list has grown and now includes big names like Nestle, Haldiram, Pepsi, Hindustan Lever and others. All these companies had been importing potato flakes before Merino started production.

Merino now has an unbeatable range of nine instant snack mixes that include Pav Bhaji; Hara Bhara Kebab; Cheese Balls; Burger Patty; Shami Kebab; Soya Roll; Aloo Bonda, Veg

Cutlet and Aloo Tikki. In the next few years, the company has plans to take the number to 15.

It has not been an easy journey for Merino. Prakash Lohia said that the initial years were difficult since the company had to convince farmers to grow potatoes meant for flakes. Merino undertook "extensive research, demonstrated technology and supplied seeds to farmers". The aim was to increase potato productivity: from eight tonnes per hectare to 25 tonne per hectare.

For Merino, this was a diversification: it was earlier in the cold storage business. In 1968, the company moved "to farming, bio-technology and food processing. For harvesting and producing the best variety of potatoes for flakes, we have taken up tissue culture across 2,000 acres", said Lohia. The move has paid off: the company has a turnover of `95

crore and is "eyeing 25 per cent revenue growth in the next financial year", emphasized Lohia.

Merino has a manufacturing unit at Hapur in Uttar Pradesh that started operations in 2005-06. With machinery imported from one of the best-known food processing technology providers in the potato and cheese segments, BMA Netherlands, the first of its kind potato processing plant is completely automated. Over the years, it has increased its production and today it has the capacity to process more than 50,000 tonnes of potatoes annually. Till 2013, Merino has had to expand the plant four times.

One of the successes of Vegit's snacks, according to Lohia, is the fact that "Indian housewives take a pride to cook for her family and Vegit provides her the opportunity to try out the ready-to-cook mixes that gives the dishes a twist, without robbing her personal touch. Moreover "the ready mixes also taste the same as those prepared at home in a conventional way," said Lohia and added the other reason for the popularity of its snack: they are all economically priced. Add to that the fact that they take a few minutes to cook. "Vegit products offer a 100 per cent classic Indian flavour. Its preparation involves only 10 per cent of time and effort spent in cooking, and it retains the taste of food cooked the traditional way," said Lohia.

In the retail sector, Merino's snack mix business would be about 60 per cent while the remainder would be institutional. However, in the case of Aloo Mash, it is a different scenario: it holds 80 per cent of the institutional buyers while 20 per cent goes to the retail. "We have a strong hold in the hotel, restaurant and catering (HORECA) segment. However, our pan-India retail presence is robust – we have a network of over 5,000 dealers and outlets," said Lohia.

Having established itself in the domestic market, Vegit is all set to go abroad. It has started the process of exporting to the United States, which has a huge Indian diaspora.

Lohia pointed out that the ready-to-cook segment has been growing in the metropolitan and Tier-I cities, and there is competition. On its part, Merino is on the ball and its innovative products has been able to take care

of the competition. The company started with Vegit Aloo Mash and Potato Flakes in 2005 but over the years, there has been a slew of products with the Pav Bhaji Mix, for example, being a one-of-its-kind product. The company plans to expand to all the metros and then move on to Tier-II cities that Lohia believes will see future growth.

As Lohia put it: "We do not directly compete with anyone. We at Vegit offer various delicacies in the ready-to-cook market segments, which, so far, was difficult or tiring to make. Therefore, we are one of the prominent players in the market, and we believe others are following us."

An innovation led enterprise, Merino believes that with the rise in disposable incomes and an increase in nuclear families, Indian consumers will continue to explore options and that is where ready-to-cook healthy

convenience foods will come in. Ready-to-eat (RTE) meals are designed to save consumers time in the kitchen and are packaged for a long shelf life with little loss of flavour and nutrients over time.

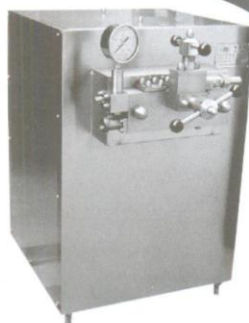
Lohia believes that the RTE and RTC (Ready-to-cook) segments are growing at a pace of 35 per cent year-on-year and the market in India is showing remarkable growth owing to the income and consumption capacities of the consumers.

With ample scope for innovation in the RTC segment that the heat-and-eat category does not have, Merino and Prakash Lohia is looking at enhancing productivity: from 2,000 metric tonnes to 8,000 metric tonnes in a phased manner over the years. The company ultimately aims to reach 12,000 metric tonnes.

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