

CASE STUDIES IN FOOD PROTECTION

Golden State Foods' Quality Assurance Turns to Platinum

By Robbie Tarpley Raffish

Hi-tech warehouses. Truckers connected by Wi-Fi. State-of-the-art tracking by laptops. Remote-monitored temperature sensors. In today's world, these are some of the newest hi-tech safeguards of American food distribution.

Yet, according to Bob Jorge, President of Distribution for Golden State Foods (GSF), food safety comes down to one decidedly low-tech thing: people. "You can have all the technology available,

but if you don't have well-trained and committed people, you can fall short in an industry where failure can literally mean customers' lives."

Jorge knows his material: he personally has more than 25 years of management experience (17 in food service), and his company handles warehouse and distribution services for more than 2,800 McDonald's Restaurants in the U.S. Earlier this year, four of GSF's distribution centers—Greensboro, NC; Lexington, SC; City of Industry, CA and Sumner, WA—were honored with Silliker

from receiving to cold chain storage, pest control to property maintenance—the audits measure the care each location puts into food safety through both documentation and full-day site visits. "For food safety to be a company's top priority, it has to permeate its culture," said Gary Smith, Director of Audit for Silliker. "Companies that succeed over the long haul have to train their employees that no matter what their role is in the organization, they have some responsibility for the actual safety of the product."

Platinum Service for the Golden Arches

And success is exactly what the GSF team is after: the four GSF distribution centers that took top spots on the Silliker Platinum Audit Awards rankings were in good company: five of the six other spots went to other companies' distribution centers serving other McDonald's restaurants.

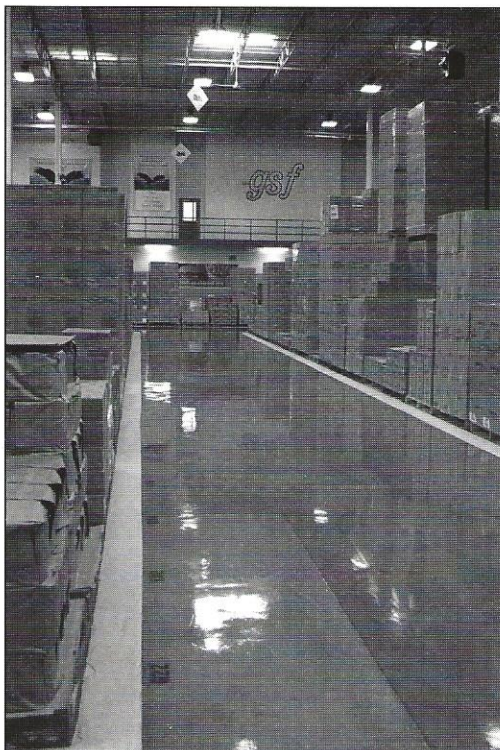
But the average customer pulls up to a McDonald's restaurant blissfully unaware of the steps taken to bring a safe product to their order. Ask most consumers and they will tell you outright that they do not know how the food got into their take-out bag—only that it looks good and tastes right. "And that is how it should be," according to Jorge.

Ranked among the largest food distributors in the United States, GSF provides products and services in more than 50 countries worldwide and is one of the world's largest diversified suppliers to the Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) industry. Its core business includes processing and distribution of liquid products, meat products, produce, bakery and other services such as raw material and equipment sourcing and procurement and on-site maintenance. As the second-largest distributor of McDonald's products, GSF operates 365 days a year to ensure product safety and quality.

"Our end-use customers—those who purchase McDonald's products—should be thinking only

Platinum Audit Awards for their commitment to food safety. The awards recognize distribution centers that receive top scores from among the thousands of audits that Silliker, one of the world's largest food testing and auditing companies, executes each year.

Judged on all aspects of the distribution system—



about how consistent the quality of the food is. If you have ever had a Big Mac in one McDonald's and then ordered it in another, you should find that it tastes exactly the same in both places. Commitment to product quality has a great deal to do with that," he added.

The Training Advantage

So how is it that McDonald's French Fries taste the same from Los Angeles to Atlanta? Commitment to training. At Golden State Foods, safety begins even before the product reaches the front doors. Every member of the staff must undergo an orientation process, which involves watching several videos, taking various tests and doing "hands-on" training. The orientation includes product handling, storage, temperature monitoring and more. Each warehouse employee and delivery driver begins by handling the least sensitive products, such as paper goods, and must pass a series of standards before being allowed to handle perishables.

"The video training is an essential part of the orientation process for new associates," said Jorge. "Video, when part of a broader training program, is a great tool. It allows people to see our operation at work, view processes up close and review elements they want to understand better over and over again."

One video, "Working with the System," is an introduction to GSF and familiarizes the new associate with the safety and cleanliness standards that are integral to GSF's culture. It also discusses the picking, loading, storage and receiving processes and shows how to keep product in the proper rotation. The Hazardous Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) video covers the necessary temperature ranges for various products and informs the new associate of the consequences of deviations from the known ranges. It shows how various organisms can infiltrate product if extreme care is not taken. The HACCP program tracks the product temperatures from the manufacturer, to the carrier, to the distribution center and right to the back door of the end user. GSF associates are able to verify the proper handling of the product along the chain and pinpoint any break in the chain that may have caused a deviation.

All new GSF associates are trained in the proper techniques for performing Sanitation Standard Operating Procedures (SSOPs), as well. Training is repeated annually and all sanitors are trained in every task they perform.

"Food safety is not just a function at Golden State Foods, but a way of life," explains Jorge. "There are daily, weekly, monthly and bi-yearly task reports, which are signed by the sanitors and verified by their supervisors. These records are maintained and filed for review. Every employee is accountable at every turn."

Sanitors perform not only cleaning tasks, but when the use of water or chemicals is needed, they are instructed on the proper dilution rate as described in the SSOP, as well as the proper clean up and disposal of all materials used. Also covered is the return of all equipment used to the designated areas. Sanitors and maintenance associates are also trained in the correct procedures for pest control and the maintenance and record keeping of all warehouse equipment. Facility inspections are performed weekly. Trailer inspections are performed before every trailer is loaded and each trailer's condition is recorded for veri-

fication to include cleanliness, safety of equipment and proper temperature settings.

"Quality control is the responsibility of everyone in the organization, so all new associates are trained on how to receive product into the distribution center," added Jorge. "Our Quality Inspection Program (QIP) presents step-by-step procedures that are to be adhered to at all times to ensure product integrity."

For instance, trailers are inspected upon arrival for any possible hazards; the temperature of the unit setting is recorded; and the seal must be intact upon receipt of the trailer. During the receiving process the trailer is "black-lighted" to look for any signs of pest infestation. The product is then unloaded with the receiver performing three temperature checks on the product—one each from the rear, middle and nose of the trailer. These temperatures are recorded on the Record of Receipts. All associates are shown visual characteristics of various products that may be suspect.

All associates must view a forklift safety video and take a written test to receive their forklift operator's license. This video explains the proper use of the equipment and the safety requirements. Classroom instruction is also given, which consists of a PowerPoint presentation and a written exam. GSF also incorporates "hands-on" training during which an associate's skill is evaluated.

To this point, the new GSF associate has had classroom training only. The final step is to begin training on the warehouse floor. GSF's lead man and supervisor are in charge of all warehouse training, which lasts for a minimum of four weeks. This training covers all aspects of the warehouseman's job responsibilities, including an understanding of GSF's Gold Standard culture.

Receive-to-Ship: The Goals are Definitively Safety and Security

Information about the incoming loads—everything from the pre-packaged chicken nuggets to the eggs for Egg McMuffins—is tracked by computers. When the product is delivered to a GSF distribution center's receiving dock, the seals are checked on the arriving truck to make sure that nothing has been tampered with in any way. If the seals look as if they have been touched, the load is sent back—no matter what. In addition, drivers' logs are checked to assure that the temperature in the truck has remained stable. GSF drivers check their truck temperatures up to eight times a shift.

Once a load has been accepted at a GSF plant, the cold chain is managed very carefully. In fact, each employee has to be certified in safety and needs a separate license for each piece of equipment they operate. From receiving—where employees are trained to inspect incoming product—to shipping, where documentation has to be perfect for the product to leave the building, the focus is on the details. Having completed this training, GSF employees can "bid" for work in other parts of the facility.

"You can't just walk into an industrial freezer and start working," said Jim Brooks, manager of the Golden State Foods' Greensboro, NC Distribution Center. "You have to know how to rotate product, manage the mechanical aspects of the hard-

ware, operate the tracking software and more. It is a complicated process and we allow our employees to move up into these areas only when they have completed training and passed several tests."

The process works. The Greensboro plant alone has more than 20 people on staff with 25 or more years of service. Across GSF nearly 40% of the staff has been with the company 10 years; about 15% have been on the payroll for 20 years.

"Our goal is to hire and keep the best people at each of our plants," said Jorge. "Our values in part read 'treat others like you want to be treated' and that goes for not only how we treat the customer, but how we treat each other in the company."

During the last three years, Golden State Foods has been faced with a new challenge: the specter of domestic terrorism. "If safety and security were important before September 11, 2001—and they clearly were—the terrorist attacks took the food industry's focus to a whole new level," said Jorge. "Our security consultants have worked continuously to assure that our facilities are secure and cannot be tampered with. We make it as difficult as possible for anyone other than authorized personnel to have contact with the products."

Because of that, GSF has found it returns a slightly higher percentage of truck loads and individual products to suppliers these days. And it spends even more time training employees to spot when something is not right.

"Anyone in any of our plants can stop a shipment or shut down a loading process," said Jorge. "It is the people in our facilities who see and touch the product every day, and we trust them, once they are trained correctly, to be our eyes and ears. Who best to know what looks, smells or feels wrong than the employee in the plant? We trust them as much as McDonald's trusts us."

Honest Competition and Good Fun

With all the training, checking, cross-checking and documentation, GSF remembers to keep it light at times, too. And while it is true that GSF employees compete for promotions, they also compete for fun.

"Each year we have a Truck Rodeo where our drivers compete in front of their families and friends for the title of 'Driver of the Year,'" said Brooks. "We have a similar Warehouse Skills Competition for our warehouse employees, where they can show off their abilities to use both the equipment and their understanding of the warehouse systems. This keeps folks focused on the skills they need to obtain and sharpen while lending some fun to the process."

What makes the Silliker Platinum Audit Award even sweeter to Brooks and his team is the fact that "the auditor was here for more than 12 hours, going over all of our documentation,



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processes, training materials in an extremely comprehensive overview," he said. "We could really see where our philosophy, which focuses on attracting great employees and then cultivating them by giving them advancement opportunities, really helps us succeed in the mission of making the best product and maintaining the highest standards."

The audits are ranked on a 100-point scale. All four of the award-winning GSF Teams scored above a 97%. "Our audits are intrusive and methodical events, to be sure, so it is a testament to any company's efforts when it can score above a 96%," added Smith. "For Golden State Foods to have scored above 97% at four different locations really demonstrates how much the company incorporates foods safety into every aspect of its culture. It was a highly commendable event."

The North Carolina facility celebrated in the same style it competes—with full focus. "We had a special pin made for every member of the team. There are so many people the consumer never sees, such as the sanitation folks who keep the plant clean and the warehouse crew. But we know that the food can't reach the restaurant without them, and they deserve to be recognized," said Brooks.

In addition, one of the McDonald's supply chain managers came to the facility to present the award and speak with the GSF associates during a special lunch in their honor. The day after the employee celebration luncheon, Brooks was back at his desk researching food safety figures for incoming trucks.

"You know, celebrating is a good thing. We should all take the time to recognize the tremendous efforts folks make each day. But next week those auditors will be back to start the 2004 process—and we will be ready for them." □

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