



The Great Western Brewing Company is the first Canadian company to have installed the Performance series case-packer from Delkor Systems at its operations in Saskatoon, Sask.

SIZE MATTERS

Saskatchewan brewer invests in intelligent case-packing machinery to support warm market response to its large-format beer packaging

By George Guidoni, Editor

Formerly referred to as “Paris of the Prairies” for the eight landmark bridges straddling the South Saskatchewan River, the city of Saskatoon has many good things going for it in terms of a growing population, a vibrant cultural scene, and a buoyant local economy driven by Saskatchewan’s vast wealth of natural resources and agricultural commodities.

Coupled with the natural charms of surrounding prairie grasslands and the majestic open skies above, the province’s largest city is also home to one of Canada’s oldest provincial breweries that, unthinkable, once came within a whisker of closure and demolition.

Started up in 1927 under the **Hub City Brewing Company** moniker—a nod to Saskatoon’s status as Canada’s central commercial distribution hub—the upstart brewer changed its name to **Western Canada Brewing Company**

in 1930 and then to **Drewery’s Ltd.** in 1932.

Acquired by **O’Keefe Brewing** in 1956, the brewery’s days seemed to be numbered after a 1988 merger between **Carling O’Keefe** and **Molson Brewing Company**, with an imminent loss of about 40 full-time jobs at the plant.

Remarkably, a group of 16 employees and management pooled their resources and secured enough government financial assistance to buy the facility and its assets from Molson in 1989—launching the **Great Western Brewing Company** the following year.

Starting with two initial brands, Great Western’s product portfolio grew to comprise 11 different brand names by 2004, along with a thriving third-party manufacturing and co-packing business with various marketers to produce beer and other beverages at the facility.

With annual production capacity of about 275,000 hectoliters, the independent, employee-owned brewer today ranks as one of the largest regional brewers in

Right:
The Performance series case-packer from Delkor Systems has been dedicated to the case-packing of large-format Mega Pack beer cases holding 36 or 48 cans of beer per case.



Bottom:
The Great Western brewery in Saskatoon produces an average of 250,000 beer cans per day.



western Canada, producing about 250,000 cans of beer per day and marketing its products throughout western Canada.

“Our brands are very well-known in Saskatchewan, and we are gaining market share in Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia,” says vice-president of operations Allan Genest.

“We are constantly pursuing new opportunities to expand our regional reach,” says Genest, citing a healthy customer base that includes government-operated liquor stores, bars, pubs, restaurants, entertainment venues and sports teams, among others.

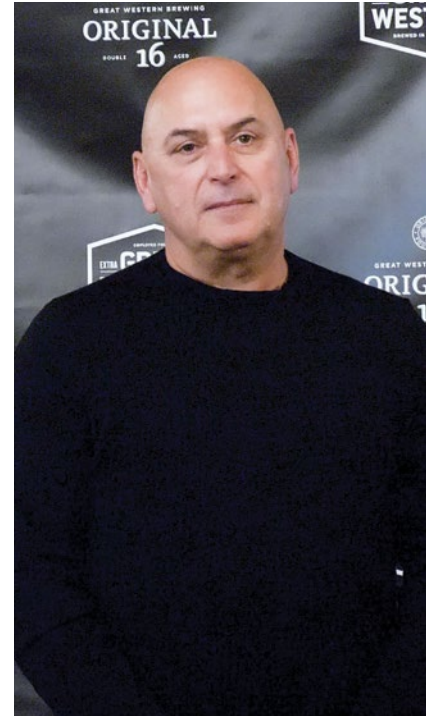
“We have beverages that appeal to all demographics: male and female, value-priced, mainstream and premium beer drinkers,” notes Genest, adding the facility currently houses three canning lines and one keg line to keep production going at a healthy pace throughout the year.

“We do our packaging over four 10-hour shifts, and we’ll often run a double 10-hour shift during the summer months,” Genest relates.

“That’s 20 hours of packaging, with four hours to clean between shifts,” he adds.

As Genest relates, the brewery currently manufactures 22 different prod-





Above: Great Western Brewing Company's vice-president of operations Allan Genest.



Left: Supplied by Graphic Packaging International, the pre-printed Mega Pack cases making their way in and out of the Performance series case-packer.

ucts in 10 different packaging formats, with the company's **Original 16** premium brand family—so named as tribute to the 16 founding shareholders—the flagship **Great Western** range (mainstream) and **Brewhouse** (value) brands being its bestselling products.

In fact, the *Original 16* brand of pre-

mium beers is widely acknowledged as “Saskatchewan’s favorite beer brand,” according to Genest.

Despite being a regional player, Great Western has been recognized with multiple prestigious international awards of excellence over the years, including:

- A Gold Medal at the *Midwest Brewers Festival* in 1999 and Bronze Winner at the 2000 *World Beer Cup* for the **Great Western Premium Light** brand;
- A Gold Medal winner at the *Midwest Brewers Festival* in 2000 for the **Great Western Premium Lager**;
- A Gold Medal winner at the Monde Selection competition in Belgium in 2001.
- Numerous *Canadian Brewing Awards*, including Gold, Silver and Bronze wins for the *Original 16 Pale Ale* and several other brands.

Most recently, the company's **Original 16 Prairie White** wheat beer brand was selected as the Gold Medal winner in the global *Hermes Creative Awards* competition for marketing excellence.

For Genest, such recognition is rounding validation of the company's proud tradition of local ingredient sourcing and manufacturing for all its products.

As the company's website proclaims, “We pay a premium to make sure that Saskatchewan's beer truly is 100-percent locally brewed, owned and grown.”

“We work directly with the farmers who grow the barley to make your beer, so we know exactly what's going into every batch we make.”

In addition to using top-quality ingredients to make its beer, the Great Western brewery is highly selective when it comes to the quality of its processing and packaging equipment, constantly upgrading its packaging lines to boost productivity, output and operational flexibility, according to Genest.

“We measure our facilities performance in many ways,” Genest relates. “From raw materials used in making our beers and energy used to manufacture on to shrinkage or any losses in our process, through to hectoliters-per-man-hour in packaging, product storage and transportation to the point-of-sale.”

Being an independent brewery also allows Great Western to respond to many





Capable of reaching throughput speeds of up to 300 containers per minute, depending on container type and style, the Performance case-packers patented Intelligent Synchronization technology allows it to control and monitor product flow and accumulation without the use of any mechanical devices.

changes in the marketplace in a timely manner, says Genest, citing the company's decision to exit the bottled beer segment a few years ago due to the fast-growing popularity of canned beer.

To facilitate the switch, the brewery has carried out extensive capital upgrades to improve its canning capabilities and expertise as part of its larger efforts to create a "state-of-the-art brewery through innovation and automation," according to Genest.

The company's proactive capital investment strategy is well encapsulated on its canning lines with top-of-the-line packaging equipment that comprises:

- A model **609** bulk can depalletizer from the **American Can Company**;
- A high-speed **Crown** filler with an **Angelus** model **6rH** seamer;
- A **Krones Checkmat** inline inspection system, along with a Krones conveyor systems and a Krones tunnel pasteurizer.
- An inline **BBull** fill and leak detection system.
- A **Douglas Machine** cartoner;
- **C&A Industries** conveying systems.
- An **FKI** brand palletizer from **Honeywell Intelligrated**.

In the spring of 2021, the Great West-

ern brewery made another major investment in its canning operations with the installation of a new 'Mega Pack Line,' dedicated to the production of large-format beer cases holding 36 to 48 beer cans per case.

As Genest explains, the customer demand for large-format beer packaging soared during the past two years of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns—opening a lucrative market niche for Great Western to tap into.

"During the pandemic, consumers wanted to make less trips and to buy more quantity of products per trip," Genest relates.

"Larger pack size also means a more competitive price based on volume," adds Genest, citing "highly competitive" pricing pressures in the beer market.

With demand for the new Mega Pack cases growing in leaps and bounds, the brewer quickly found itself in need of a high-performance case-packing machine that would automatically handle the packing of filled aluminum cans, supplied by **Crown Metal Corporation**, inside the pre-printed paperboard large-format cartons manufactured by **Graphic Packaging International**.

After carefully evaluating available options, Great Western decided to contact **Delkor Systems, Inc.**, a renowned manufacturer of automatic secondary packaging machinery headquartered in Minneapolis, Minn.

Working closely with Delkor's machinery experts, Great Western quickly found the solution it was looking for with Delkor's **Performance** series case-packer.

Manufactured at Delkor's state-of-the-art Minneapolis production facility employing over 340 people, the **Performance** series case-packers feature double-patented **Intelligent Synchronization** technology that eliminates the need for traditional collation chains, buckets and fixed guides—minimizing change parts inventory and expenses—as well as an innovative contoured infeed system that can handle speeds of up to 300 containers per minute, depending on container type and style.

Operated via a speedy gantry pick-and-place robotic system, the compact case-packer is essentially "an electronic solution that controls and monitors both product flow and accumulation patterns without any mechanical devices," according to Delkor Systems vice-president of sales and marketing Dan Altman.

"Eliminating those components from the design makes the machine a lot more compact, so that it can fit just about anywhere, and much more economical—up to \$100,000 less than conventional mechanical designs," Altman points out.

"Moreover, the Performance machine makes changeovers super simple," says Altman, adding most standard product



(From top)

The historic building housing the Great Western Brewing company has been a local Saskatoon landmark since 1927.

Palletized and stretchwrapped stacks of beer cases being readied for customer delivery in the brewery's shipping area.



sistent flow of new entrants.

“Our move into large-format packaging is just one of several packaging innovations we’re currently working on,” Genest confides, “and we are looking forward to building on our success.”

For Delkor’s Altman, the *Performance* case-packer installation project at Great Western will always have a special place in his heart as well.

“This was our first installation of the *Performance* case-packer in Canada,” he says, “and we could not think of a better first-time client.

“They are a great company, with great people who know exactly what they need to do and what kind of machinery they need to do their job the best they can.”

According to Altman, the introduction of the *Performance* case-packers to the market in 2018 has been one of Delkor Systems’ most successful new product launches in years, with 62 *Performance* case-packers sold and installed to date.

Marking its debut in the Canadian market with a successful installation and commissioning at the Great Western brewery is the proverbial icing on the cake, according to Altman.

“We are proud to have our technology put to good use by people who understand what makes our technology a good investment for their business,” Altman sums up, “and we wish them all the success in the world.”

SUPPLIERS

Delkor Systems, Inc.



Please see a video of the Delkor Systems’ *Performance* series case-packer in action at the Great Western Brewing plant in Saskatoon, Sask., on Canadian Packaging TV at: www.canadianpackaging.com

changeovers can be performed in two to three minutes without any tools and minimal change parts.

Fully loaded with leading-edge *Allen-Bradley* process controls and software from **Rockwell Automation**—a standard feature on all Delkor-built packaging machinery—the *Performance* case-packer has proven its worth in flying colors since arriving at the Great Western brewery.

“The Delkor machine has been awesome to work with,” says Great Western Brewing’s packaging manager Brian Ellard, who initially recommended Delkor to Genest based on his prior professional experience with Delkor’s technology.

“The thing I like the most is how easy it is to change over from different pack sizes,” Ellard states. “If we’re running different sizes back-to-back, it only takes a few minutes with toolless changeover to adjust, which makes it easy and efficient for our maintenance staff.

“The machine has been running above

our expectations,” Ellard states, “with better case-packing efficiencies than we ever had before.”

Genest agrees, lauding the *Performance* series case-packer for its “high-quality engineering and manufacturing.”

Says Genest: “The Delkor *Performance* loader has proven to be very efficient in our operation.

“The design and ease of changeover makes this machine one of our best in the facility,” states Genest, while also complimenting Delkor technicians for “flawless installation and follow-up support.

“The integration of the machine to our in-house maintenance team was very well orchestrated and well-received by our team,” he adds, adding the new machine has had a positive impact on the brewery’s line efficiencies and overall packaging competencies.

“Packaging plays a strong role in our business,” he says, “as it must work harder than ever to enable us to compete in a highly fragmented market with a con-