

Sprague Foods

Sprague Foods Ltd. is a canned and jarred food manufacturer located in Belleville, Ontario. It manufactures food for private label consumers, as well as under its own brand name: Sprague Foods. Some of its most popular products include soups made from beans and lentils, rice pudding, and gourmet tomato sauces. Its highly-automated 33,000 square-foot facility frequently fulfills food safety standards implemented by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). The president of the company is Rick Sprague, the fourth generation of the Sprague family to be involved in the business, which began in 1925.

Headquarters	385 College St. E., Belleville, Ontario, K8N 5S7
Year Established	1925
NAICS	311990 - All other food manufacturing
Employees	42
Major Expansions	1996
Exports	US, Asia-Pacific
Parent Company	N/A
Other Locations	N/A

For nearly a century, the Sprague family has been defined by its passion for food. This passion continues to manifest itself through Sprague Foods Ltd., a medium-sized Canadian cannery in Belleville, Ontario. Sprague Foods produces high-quality canned and jarred food products for a select group of private label customers, as well as under its own Sprague brand. Some of its most popular products are made with beans, lentils, chickpeas, and other soup ingredients. Customers can find Sprague products in small, local grocery stores, and in national chains like Costco and Sobeys. Under the leadership of company president Rick Sprague—the fourth generation of the Sprague family to be involved in the business—Sprague Foods focuses on producing high-quality, healthy foods with natural ingredients.

Few small and medium-sized enterprises have a history as rich and interesting as Sprague Foods. The business began in 1925 with Rick’s great-grandfather, Grant Sprague. Grant grew up on Big Island in Prince Edward County, and eventually opened one of the many seasonal canning operations in the area. The cannery was essentially a side business for Grant as it only operated for six weeks a year and much of his time was dedicated to his other business (the Sprague Telephone Company). Pumpkins and tomatoes were the initial two products canned by the Sprague family, with the produce coming from local farmers in the area.

Grant's son, Jay, was handed the reins to the canning business a few years after it began, and operated it successfully for over 40 years. When Jay's son Roger and daughter-in-law Dana took over in 1967, Sprague Foods was still canning local produce for small grocery stores. Roger and Dana took advantage of the exploding consumer demand for beans and lentils in the 1980s and shifted the focus of the company to these products. To accommodate this growth, Sprague Foods moved to a state-of-the-art facility in Belleville in 1996.

Finally, in 2009, Roger's son, Rick, became president of Sprague Foods. Like his forebearers, Rick has always had a passion for food; however, he has also shaped the company to have an even greater emphasis on innovation in food science and technology.

The past few years have seen Sprague Foods' business grow substantially. In 2017, revenue tripled from the previous year. Further, the number of employees grew from 30 in April 2017 to 42 by August 2018. This growth stems largely from management's ability to take advantage of trends in the industry. For example, when the business relocated to Belleville in 1996, the Spragues wanted to be sure that they were using truly world-class, cutting-edge equipment. Accordingly, they travelled to Europe to better understand the technologies being leveraged by companies there. Similarly, the new plant was then designed to satisfy the highest sanitation standards in the world, including those of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency; for instance, Sprague Foods' thermal processing system allows it to fully cook its beans inside the can on the packing line, reducing any chance of contamination. As Rick notes, the Sprague family takes great pride in using this technology to ensure that products are not only nutritious and tasty, but also incredibly safe.

Sprague Foods' advanced facility allows it to produce higher-quality products in smaller batches, which is a norm that the North American market has been shifting towards in recent years. Rick likens the shift in the canned foods industry to that in the beer market in Ontario over the past 20 years. Specifically, smaller craft breweries are taking market share away from some of the larger producers because many consumers now favour a local, high-quality product. In a similar fashion, conscientious consumers love Sprague Foods' products because they are Canadian-made, nutritious, and produced by a family company.

The magnitude of recent growth at Sprague Foods would not have been possible without its team of diverse employees. The company hires individuals from many different backgrounds, from culinary and food sciences to engineering and business. Sprague Foods sometimes works with the Food Science program at the University of Guelph (of which Rick is an alumnus) to pursue innovative research and help train certain employees. Rick explains that as the company's technology continues to become increasingly advanced, it will need even more highly skilled employees who are comfortable working with industry-leading machinery and technological systems.

At present, Sprague Foods' greatest challenge is managing its current, unprecedented growth; the company has never had such a high volume of orders to fulfill. For a family-run business like Sprague Foods, this is a very welcome challenge, and one that presents many exciting opportunities.

However, in order to accommodate growing demand, the company must address another challenge — staffing. As Rick explains, a business can only grow as much as its employee base can handle. Maintaining Sprague Foods' current momentum will hinge on its ability to attract workers for a variety of positions. Automation is helping the company by yielding more output per employee, but it still needs even more workers.

A final challenge that often accompanies booming growth is selecting the right business opportunities. Against the backdrop of the multibillion dollar food industry, Sprague Foods must be selective, choosing only those opportunities that fit with its culture and strategic focus.

In both the short and long term, Sprague Foods is looking to capitalize on all of its growth by maintaining its ongoing commitment to innovation in food science and technology. Another focus of the company's strategy is paying attention to consumer trends among younger customers. These customers value locally made, high-quality products, and are not as attached to legacy brands (e.g., Heinz or Campbell's). Rick wants to ensure Sprague Foods continues to pay attention to these consumers because he believes they will drive the future of the food industry.

Sprague Foods is well-positioned to keep adding to its rich company history. Its growing success and geographic location in the beautiful and business-friendly Bay of Quinte region can only continue to pay off. Ontario manufacturers across all industries should look to Sprague Foods to understand how they too might take advantage of market trends to grow their business.