



A French jewel in the crown of baking

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Angus Kennedy, Editor, went to find out (among other things) what makes women sleep outside a brand new bread factory and how Mecatherm have carved out such a position to become one of the world leaders in the field of baking equipment.

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All set. You know it's a long drive from Kent in the UK to Alsace in France. The sort of drive that is a good idea at the time, but not so much fun in the afternoon when I realise that I have been driving for hours and had foolishly forgot my SatNav too! Oh and I didn't have a map either, so the fact that I arrived on time to visit this jewel-of-a-business in the middle of some of the most beautiful countryside in France was quite remarkable. I would add too that the people that I had the pleasure of becoming acquainted with at Mecatherm were equally remarkable.

Founded in 1964 and now in their 50th year, The Mecatherm Group's success got off to a solid start based on the visions and accompanying wisdom of the company's founder, René Voegtlin.

The company has been founded on revolutionary ideas and this vision evidently still thrives within the business veins today. The Mecatherm Group has produced up to now more than 700 lines spread over 60 countries.

In 2004 the company turned over €43 million and only ten years later, this was boosted to over €115 million and now they are situated in a fabulous 30,000 square metre site (10,000 more than 2004). I think on these facts

“ We started by exporting to Japan with the development of our first proofer and multi-deck tunnel oven. ”

alone, it's safe to say this is a highly successful global business and they duly deserve to celebrate their 50 years this year. I was itching to discover the full Mecatherm story, especially being one of the few journalists to write about them in person and how they pulled it all off.

On my arrival in the reception, immediately I was put at ease by the classic type of French hospitality that only those who experience it know what I am talking about. My journey without a map was I admit greatly assisted somewhat by the fact that my wife comes from Lorraine, not so far from Barembach, where the Mecatherm factory is situated. And actually when I approached the site up the winding hills trees and view points for tourists,

I was expecting to see a hotel or ski resort as opposed to a bakery equipment factory. My host Mr. Henrick Seimpère their Marketing Manager was there to greet me. We found a suitable meeting room and got started right away.

Within a very short period of time another gentleman popped his head round the door to greet us, perhaps he had heard about my epic journey and wished to congratulate me on arriving at all! I had no idea whom he was but he seemed most pleasant at the time. "Come," he insisted, "this room is not good enough for us," and with that, we were whisked off to his very elegant private office. And this is what I instantly liked about the president of the business, he sees an opportunity (that's how he helped build the company) and takes it, bam, and within a very short period of time with my hosts, I was feeling, as I sank into a very comfy leather armchair, how much my drive had been very much worth it.

Bernard Zorn, President, is everything you can like and expect from a perfectly courteous and entertaining French gentleman. He and his colleague Henrick immediately made me laugh and I made them too when Bernard saw that I was wearing quite hideous Union Jack socks for the day. This was at a time

when I was feeling mildly patriotic (pre-world cup) clutching to the faint idea that England could actually play football. We immediately got talking.

"I joined in 1974 Angus," said Bernard as he sank back into his chair holding his hands. "Making equipment for the industrial bakery industry was a completely new concept at the time, they thought we were mad! At that time the average baguette had a six-hour shelf life. The company was involved really in making heating for houses, hence the company name. We made that six-hour shelf life, thought to be a weakness, into our strength. Everyone wants fresh bread but not with this type of shelf life and now it's the industry standard."

According to Bernard, if a supermarket sells (bakes) fresh bread daily, overall sales can increase to over 8% a year. Open window baking as they call it, is extremely popular with consumers enjoying the experience of having baking in the window. It's small wonder this business is expanding at the rate they are.

"We started by exporting to Japan with the development of our first proofer and multi-deck tunnel oven. The break came for us when we realised that most bread in these areas was American





tin bread at the time of the end of the Korean war. So we sold a line to Yamazaki Bakery and Confectionery and then after that, the US took off for us when we sold our first industrial line in 1979. I flew over to LA," he laughed, remembering in every detail the pleasurable experience. "It was all Californian Sour bread then Angus and a freshly baked 'French stick' was unheard of! But with the help of the French consulate we sold the first line in the US and it was a huge success. We now have 100 lines at least in North America alone," he said proudly.

In 1989 Mecatherm exports were 70% of turnover and that now has risen to over 90% of sales. Sales, they explained to me, were 1/3 frozen, 1/3 variety lines and 1/3 classical lines, while crusty bread accounts for 60% of sales and soft bread at 40%. Mecatherm took the lead in the early 80's and started to develop equipment for frozen dough and par baked for modified atmosphere packing. They succeeded in boosting industrial bakery successes by producing fresh to frozen. Probably the biggest revolution in modern baking processing.

"It's taken over artisans completely," added Bernard. "It was a question of us asking the questions about a short shelf life and looking at the problems then coming back and solving them; frozen makes perfect sense! Our first high capacity and moulder line with freezer came in 1985, and soon after that we decided to produce equipment for par baked with mixing, dividing, moulding, special baking oven and freezing. The modular system and first par-baked line was in 1990 and then the mega-line in 2000. In my opinion we were the pioneers and introduced the time to make a fresh industrial baked product."

"And then Angus, yes you must meet Oliver Sergent, our CEO. He's a good man, very good and we were really pleased when he joined us with the purchase of Gouet in 2006." Olivier Sergent is Mr Zorn's successor at the head of the group and he has assured the development's continuity of the company since July 2014.

"Many of our customers are all experiencing double digit growth and have become leaders in their respective fields. We have had much success in the Middle East and parts of Africa, especially in old colonies where bread used to be a staple diet and was lost after independence. We opened our Dubai office recently in November 2013. There is a lack of bread in Africa," he added, moving forward from his chair to explain.

"In wars people live with anything but not bread and then there's a revolution! Look at Egypt. It started when they ran out of bread. Bread is a lifeline! I had an amazing experience





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recently," he paused, "you never know what will happen. We had an enquiry from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an investor who literally bought three lines from us in record time. It has been a huge success; he has bought another five lines and you wouldn't believe it but bread is so popular there that women sleep outside the factory to collect the bread in the morning. And the trucks initially bought for delivering the bread, serve to daily transportation of the money to the bank (at least one of them.) The story has become such a success that the protection safety has been assumed around the factory by the Congolese army".

After the integration of Gouet in 2007, they launched the Mecaflow system, a laminating line and then in 2012 the bloc combi and baking (DAO oven) lines. Henrick took me to see the impressive 4000 square metre lab, well a mini factory really, where customers fly in from all around the world and can produce and test their products on a large scale plant to see how their products behave.

Henrick explained about the Mecatherm service from their transport and installation service of a new plant and told me that the lines are installed uppermost by Mecatherm's technicians. Everything is tested down to the last crumb and customer follow up and training, he added, is some of the best in the world.

Mecatherm specialise in industrial bakery production through and through from 10-100 tonnes a day including anything from the trendiest loaf to the local customised varieties and shapes. They specialise in making a hand-baked loaf by the tonne. Not just bread, but a wide range of applications from crusty bread, sliced toasts, buns to family rolls. They also accommodate the needs of flat bread sweet, savoury bread, bagels, cake dough tarts and pizzas.

This company deserves to celebrate a good run of 50 years of seeing the future, not giving up easily and having the strength to create the markets that they know are coming. Everything about them, especially their 'Frenchness,' is endearing and sadly I had to head back home (with bread in the car of course.) But in my opinion if you are going to make a French stick why not go to the people that have been part of that creation.

If you would like Angus to visit and write about your factory you can email him directly on editor@kennedys.co.uk.

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