

# FOOD PLANTS

of the year

2008-09  
Fruits & Vegetables Honoree

## Fruit of its labors

Orval Kent's Linares, Mexico, plant marks its 20th anniversary with record productivity, quality gains.



Photo courtesy of Orval Kent Foods Co.

More than 25 million pounds of fresh-cut fruit is prepared and packaged at Orval Kent's Linares, Mexico, plant.

Last year, employees at Orval Kent Food Co.'s Linares, Mexico, plant had a lot to celebrate. The 113,500-square-foot fruit processing facility marked its 20th anniversary and many of its workers have been with the company since it opened its doors.

"Last fall, we celebrated our 20th year as Orval Kent's fresh fruit processing plant," says Plant Director Pedro Vaquero. "Reaching this milestone was significant but even more important was establishing a record high production level — a 30 percent increase from 2007 — with the lowest incidence of customer complaints [per million pounds produced] in our facility's history. These accomplishments

truly speak to the culture of teamwork, efficiency and quality that we have created over the past two decades."

For the record, this two-building facility employs about 650 people who, last year, prepared and packaged more than 25 million pounds of refrigerated fresh-cut pineapple, mangoes, papayas, guavas, grapefruit, oranges, cantaloupe and honeydew. The operation packages fruit in PET jars, flexible pouches and plastic pails for U.S. foodservice and retail distribution.

Kent Kring is vice president of supply chain for Orval Kent, based in Wheeling, Ill.

"In today's manufacturing environment, the Linares facility is something of an anomaly. We use highly skilled labor to process fresh fruit — with automation coming into play around sanitation and packaging. A unique set of circumstances has enabled Linares' manufacturing team to excel with this model and provide the type of wholesome, fresh fruit products that are growing in the marketplace today."

To Kring's point, Linares owes its success to several idiosyncratic circumstances and storylines.

For starters, Linares has had a singular focus since opening in 1988. A cohesive management team led by Vaquero from day one communicates and leads operations. A consistent workforce adds to the team spirit — 44 employees overall have a tenure of 20 years with Orval Kent and 30 of the workers are now at a supervisor

### Just the facts

**Company:** Orval Kent Food Co.

**Food plant(s) honored:**  
Linares, Mexico

**Selection criteria:** Productivity

**Employees:** Approximately 650

**Facility size:** 113,500 square feet

**Products:** Fresh-cut pineapple, mangoes, papayas, guavas, grapefruit, oranges, cantaloupe, honeydew

2008-09  
Fruits & Vegetables Honoree

# FOOD PLANTS

of the year

level or higher. Another 45 employees (across all positions in the plant) have 19 years at Orval Kent.

The two decades of experience provide something of a competitive edge.

“The very nature of our business presents one of its biggest hurdles: sourcing raw materials when the seasonality and supply differs for each item that we process,” notes Vaquero. “We have developed a sourcing strategy that addresses this issue, but it can be somewhat of a moving target. We need to ensure we take into account the impact of weather, growing seasons, geography, crop yields, quality and cost.”

Linares’ skill in this area is not lost on corporate officials. Steve Silk is President and CEO of Orval Kent’s parent, Chef Solutions Inc.

“The Orval Kent Linares plant management team has shown its ability to manage excellently within a wide range of complexity. By taking a new approach to the scale of their business, they will double their output from 2007 to 2009, an accomplishment that is driven by their team cohesiveness and experience.”

Meanwhile, Vaquero and his team focus on controlling what they can: i.e., what happens inside the walls of Linares’ two plants. How did the

operation establish new standards in both quantity and quality? Here’s a look at how plant has:

**Increased productivity:** Linares pushed more product through, in part, because it increased capacity. While managing daily operations in its original 52,500-square-foot location, Vaquero oversaw Linares’ two-year expansion into an adjacent, 61,000-square-foot building, which had not been fully utilized. Orval Kent took advantage of open production floor space to custom design new lines for maximum product flow, processing and packaging. Vaquero also credits the company for other annual equipment upgrades.

**Improved quality / reduced customer complaints:** Every worker literally makes a difference because, at Linares, each fruit is prepared by hand. Vaquero says all salaried and hourly employees participate in bonus programs for attendance and productivity. “Everyone works as a team and everyone benefits,” he says.

These types of programs — in conjunction with continuous employee training on product quality attributes — serve to raise both the overall standards for productivity and quality.

That said, Vaquero has equally ambitious goals for 2009.

“Our production target already represents a significant increase from 2008,” he says. “We plan to increase our workforce (to as many as 1,000) and add equipment to support business growth. Recruiting and training is the key because we will need to have an efficient and fully functioning operation early in the year. That’s how we’ll be able to meet our goals.”

All the while, Linares has the full support of its corporate parent.

“The Orval Kent Linares management team is a group of experts,” says President Mark Brown. “They have created a culture that supports a highly efficient production plant. And they’ve done this by building relationships, ‘sweating the details’ and paying close attention to their goals.”

“We look forward to many more years of profitable growth from our fresh, refrigerated fruit business and thank the management team and employees for continuing to work towards that goal.” — B.G.

Refrigerated & Frozen Foods

**RFF**

Reprinted from  
Refrigerated & Frozen Foods  
© March 2009.



## About Orval Kent Food Co.

Orval Kent has over 50 years of leadership within the refrigerated prepared foods industry with strong positive national brand recognition. Providing a complete line of quality prepared products, from cold salads to fresh-cut fruit to hot meal additions, Orval Kent provides industry expertise and business solutions to a wide

variety of segments- including retail in-store delis and grab and go counters, national restaurant chains and foodservice operators.

The company operates 5 facilities in North America and has approximately 1,400 employees. Orval Kent Foods is a division of Chef Solutions, Wheeling,

IL, which is a majority-owned entity of Questor Partners Funds, a subsidiary of Questor Management Company, LLC. Questor is an equity investment firm located in Southfield, Michigan, and Chicago. Further information can be found at [www.orvalkent.com](http://www.orvalkent.com).