

What started in West Palm Beach in 1925 with one truck delivering eggs, milk and butter to The Breakers, is now the 10th largest food distribution company in the nation.



THEN — 1925: The Breakers was the largest account for the Cheney Brothers. They handled only 30 products and delivered locally.
Photo courtesy Cheney Brothers



NOW — 2007: Today, there are more than 15,000 products in company inventory, and they deliver to six states.
ERIC M. LANSFORD/Staff Photographer

Delivering the goods — for 82 years

By JAN NORRIS
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RIVIERA BEACH — Ever wonder where that packet of mustard came from for your hot dog at the ballpark? Or the all-beef frank? The bun? Even the foil sleeve it's wrapped in?

It all may have arrived on a truck from Cheney Brothers Inc. What started in West Palm Beach in 1925 with one truck delivering eggs, milk and butter to

The Breakers, is now the 10th largest food distribution company in the nation.

This food distribution company - the 10th largest in the nation - is everywhere, and likely touches your life several times every day.

If you get a TastyPastry on the way to work at the gas station, CBI probably put it there. They would have also delivered the coffee, cups, napkins, lids,

stirrers and wax paper sheets to wrap your pastry in.

If you have a cafeteria at work, they may have trucked in the food; and supplied the vending machine vendor as well. They probably provided your bathrooms with paper towels, hand soap, toilet rolls and trash bags.

Were you visiting someone in the hospital? It's a solid bet their food was delivered by

Cheney Brothers. They likely stocked the cafeteria there where you got the soup and crackers. It's a good bet that they supplied the bottled water - it's Cheney Brothers' biggest-selling item.

Did you go to a white-linen restaurant for a steak dinner? The lobster tails and the steaks are likely from Cheney Brothers. The garlic on the bread: likely CBI. Potatoes, rice or pasta? Butter pats, Sweet 'N

CBI can trace any product in vast system

Low, parsley sprinkled on the plate and salt in the shakers: likely Cheney Brothers, all.



Russell

They take food to the nursing homes, jails, hospitals, and rest areas on turnpikes all

the way to North Carolina. Their deliveries go to big and small hotels, resorts, clubhouses, convenience stores, fast-food eateries, chain bistros, pizzerias, delis, diners and four-star restaurants. If a place sells food, it probably has something from Cheney Brothers.

"We'll probably do \$700 million in sales this year," said Byron Russell, CEO of the company his grandfather founded in 1925. "In two years, I'm hoping to break \$1 billion."

That's a ton of food sales. Hundreds of thousands of tons, actually.

And it all started in West Palm Beach with eggs, milk and butter delivered by one small black truck. The Breakers was their first account. Chicken cost \$1 for 3 pounds.

They now have a fleet of 300 semis; every one refrigerated - and The Breakers is still one of their accounts, but they've added a few hundred more.

"Our first building was where Ragtops Motorcars is on South



Staff photos by BRUCE R. BENNETT

Chef Bryan Hamm pan sears the fish for the snapper Provencale. He uses vegetable oil from Cheney Brothers, delivered in 1-gallon cans. Many of the staples in the kitchen come from CBI.

Kee Grill's snapper Provencale

½ cup flour	1 teaspoon fresh basil, chopped
Salt and pepper to taste	1 cup celery, diced fine
4 6-ounce yellowtail snapper fillets	½ cup chopped parsley
5 tablespoons vegetable oil, divided use	½ cup white wine
2 cloves garlic, finely minced	1 large can crushed tomatoes (28 ounces), with juices
1 medium onion, finely diced, optional	½ cup fish stock, or clam juice
1 teaspoon dried oregano	Salt and pepper (to adjust seasoning)

Combine flour, salt and pepper to taste.

Heat 3 tablespoons oil in a large sauté pan. Pat-dry the fillets. Dredge snapper fillets lightly with seasoned flour; tap off excess. When oil is hot, add fish fillets (carefully) to the sauté pan. Cook until golden brown on both sides (approximately 3 minutes per side). Remove fish to ovenproof tray and keep warm in oven.

In clean sauté pan, add 2 tablespoons oil. Add garlic and brown lightly. Remove garlic and add oil to sauce pot. Heat over medium heat, and add chopped onions; sauté till limp. Add oregano and basil; cook for 2 minutes. Add celery, sauté about 4 minutes. Add parsley; cook 1 minute. Add white wine, tomatoes, all tomato juices and fish stock or clam juice. Bring to a boil; reduce heat to a slow boil and cook 10 minutes.

Remove from heat. Do not overcook.

Keep warm until serving; nap over fish fillets (can also be used for chicken as desired).

Makes 4 servings, plus extra sauce.

—Recipe adapted from Kee Grill.

Dixie," Russell said. "We moved here in 1985." He's in his expansive office on the second floor of the 20-acre facility that fronts the interstate off 45th Street. There's a 750-pound marlin mount on the wall and a 40-or-so-pound dolphin.

For someone who oversees

a near billion-dollar operation that sends fleets of foods to five states and the Caribbean daily, he's remarkably low-key. He's in a starched Ralph Lauren long-sleeve shirt with a St. Christopher medal around his neck, black Wrangler jeans and lizard-skin cowboy boots. Russell signs his name to a foot-high stack of checks attached to contracts as we chat.

Today, he's carved out a couple of hours to show us around a plant tight with security - from the road in, to the doors out - and bustling 24 hours a day, every day.

"The security is as much for safety as for theft," he said. With 200 forklifts and pallet loaders moving in and out of the warehouse, it can be a dangerous workplace.

A tour of offices reveals little about all the food that's in motion at all times. It's all paper, phones, computers and faxes. Employees are talking to clients, wooing others, sourcing products or figuring out the fastest, cheapest route to take to deliver them.

They're spread throughout the building. Some work from home, which could be in the Keys, or Ocala, where the new CBI distribution center has opened. Many are here, working in three shifts to find the food, get it to one of

Cheney Brothers: By the numbers

30 Number of inventory items Cheney Brothers started with

15,000+ Items in inventory today

\$1

\$3 million sales for Thanksgiving Day of 2006

\$700 million Expected sales for 2007

Price of 3 pounds of chicken when Cheney Brothers opened in 1925

300 semis in their fleet

325,000

Square footage of warehouse in Riviera Beach

1,550 Hours of operation

Employees at Cheney Brothers

24/7

\$1 billion Projected sales in 2009

0 days they have shut down in hurricanes



Cheney Brothers driver Rich Wille starts his day early, delivering to restaurants around the north end of Palm Beach County. Most open in late morning for deliveries; they'll open for dinner at 4:30 p.m.

the distribution centers, then disperse it again.

Chefs need broccoli. The price of broccoli is up because spinach has tanked in a market fearful of e.coli. Where's the best price for that broccoli? What's the best way to get it here - rail or truck? (Typically, it's a truck. Rail's too unreliable, Russell says.) These are the people who make these connections.

Some are in kitchen design and equipment sales - yet another aspect of the business. The kitchen at Coolah Fish Bar in Palm Beach Gardens, was a recent design, and completely furnished by CBI.

We wind our way out to the warehouse space - it's overwhelmingly vast.

It's 325,000 square feet stacked with aisle after aisle of steel shelving containing cardboard boxes and pallets of products stacked within inches of the overhead lights. Envision the average Publix Market, or the Goodyear blimp hangar in Pompano: They're roughly 45,000 square feet - seven of them could

fit inside this space without a squeeze.

A third of it is for cold and freezer storage; the rest is a beehive of forklifts, loading docks, scissor lifts and computers with barcode equipment.

We try to talk food and quantity: Russell wants to talk about the building's energy efficiency - he's incredibly awed by the technology he's instituted here. Lights are on motion sensors; there's a self-contained cooling system and generators that make so much power, he's able to sell off some to the city of Riviera Beach in times of need. During the hurricanes, the major law enforcement teams and the Red Cross worked from here, in perfect comfort - and with no dearth of eats.

The sheer number of products, from the gourmet cheeses, high-end proteins such as lobster tail and prime meats, to the tiniest details of a restaurants - the toothpicks or salt packets - they're here, stacked, labeled and bar-coded with a "license plate" - the label that helps CBI keeps

From warehouse to main course . . .

Tracking a Cheney Brothers delivery from the warehouse to the chef's final presentation.



The ingredients

Cheney Brothers provides a variety of products for restaurants, including these for the snapper Provencale at the Palm Beach Gardens Kee Grill.

Staff photos by BRUCE R. BENNETT



Unloading the truck

Rich Wille makes about 20 deliveries a day for CBI on his route that includes the Kee Grill. Today, the order includes ingredients for a Provencale snapper dish ordered two days before.



Beginning of the dish

Chef Bryan Hamm has begun the day's sauce for snapper Provencale; it begins with a m \acute{e} lange of canned tomatoes, garlic, onion, parsley, oil and spices brought in from the Cheney truck.



Combining ingredients

Chef Bryan Hamm places the tomato-based sauce over the fresh snapper, which was pan seared and then finished in the oven. It's cooked to order; the sauce is the last ingredient on the plate.



The final dish

Pencil-thin asparagus accompany the snapper Provencale. Fresh produce is on the CBI list, though many restaurants order it from a variety of sources. The chefs say it depends on price and freshness; they shop around just as home consumers do.

track of the product from the back of the delivery truck to the back door of the restaurant.

Employees running a sophisticated computer system, with table-top and hand-held units, create a code that inventories and tracks every item that comes in and goes out the doors.

"We can trace any product, from the hour or minute it is loaded onto a delivery truck bound for Florida, till it arrives, and goes out again to the restaurant's back door," Russell says.

The recent e.coli outbreak had caused a spinach recall. "It would have taken weeks to track those crates years ago," he said. "With this system, we know exactly what we've got, and who got it, if it was already delivered, and can alert the customer, or get it off our shelves immediately."

Temperature control is a manic pursuit here. If the expensive and perishable Plugra butter (it's 82 percent butterfat) arrives at the wrong temperature on the receiving dock, it's declined; the delivery driver returns it to its source. Workers have instant-read thermometers checking all

the perishable shipments.

If it's under 42 degrees, it's accepted. Once inside the warehouse, one of the 200 forklifts in the building moves the pallet to cold storage, where it might be stored with creams, cheeses, or other dairy products. In another refrigerated area, dry grains and products like crackers, pastas and chocolates are kept.

When a chef orders Plugra, a computer check reveals the number of boxes available; they're pulled from storage and combined with the chef's order just before shipping - but kept refrigerated throughout the process, including inside the delivery truck.

Forklift drivers beep their routes as they go from receiving docks, to the aisles, to the loading platforms, taking in pallets of foodstuffs, placing them on the three-story-high shelves or waiting as "pickers" pluck an order's worth of foods from the shelves to deliver to the awaiting semis.

A crate of cauliflower is waiting now on the loading dock for delivery to Parrot Cay in the Caribbean. Broccoli, mangos, onions

and apples are under it.

It's a constant circle of receiving, inventorying, storing, then repacking for delivery and moving it out. When an order is placed by 5 p.m., it's delivered the next day.

Russell says most products in inventory will change out every 21 days. Perishables come in and out in 24 hours. Only staples, such as canned tomatoes that come in generally once a year - "They have only one crop in Italy of San Marzano tomatoes in Italy," he says - will remain in storage till sold out and more is needed. Then, Russell says, they source elsewhere. But they don't run out, or somebody is called in to answer for the reason, he said.

That accountability, from the dairy farm in Wisconsin that makes the butter pats, to the brunch buffet at The Breakers, is what Russell prides himself - and his workers on.

"Don't write about me," he said. "I represent 1,500 awesome people who take their jobs seriously. They get it done."