



From cane field to your table, sugar is harvested, milled, refined and packaged at Okeelanta

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Every 60 seconds, 2,500 1-ounce sugar packets are filled and sealed on the line at Okeelanta Corp., 6 miles south of South Bay in western Palm Beach County. The tiny packets and the more than 400 other products produced here are destined to sweeten everything from the coffee in your cup to the muffins at the corner bakery and the cereal you pluck from the supermarket shelf.

Just outside the distribution center, a breeze is rustling row after row of sugar cane, the source of the 750 million pounds of sugar that leave Okeelanta each year to be shipped to 48 states.

Okeelanta, a subsidiary of West Palm Beach-based Florida Crystals Corp., is the company's largest facility in Palm Beach County. Its 67,000 acres include cane fields, a mill, refinery, packaging and distribution center and a power plant. Florida Crystals also owns and runs the Osceola Mill near Pahokee.

Florida Crystals is the county's largest goods-producing employer, with 1,800 employees, according to the Palm Beach County Business Development Board.

Along with U.S. Sugar Corp. and the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, they put Palm Beach County on the map as the nation's largest sugar producer. Sugar is the county's top agricultural commodity, with output ranging from 1.3 million to 2.1 million tons annually in the past few years. At 1.68 million tons of sugar projected this year, the

value will be about \$806 million. That's the raw value, calculated at 24 cents a pound. Once that raw sugar is refined and sold at retail, it's worth more.

"We produce everything from a sugar packet all the way up to a 2,000-pound tote and everything in between," said Doug Romain, vice president of a Florida Crystals subsidiary who oversees all the distribution and packaging across the continent, including at Okeelanta. The more than 400 varieties and sizes of sugar products include the company's Domino and Florida Crystals brands and many store brands in every form of sugar from powdered to brown and white, in cubes, organic and specialty sugars in many sizes and types of containers.

Like the mill and refinery on the same property, the packaging and distribution center operates seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

The proximity of all the various aspects of sugar production from start to finish is one reason the products are certified carbon-neutral. A major factor is the co-generation power plant that uses leftover sugar cane fiber to make renewable energy which runs the mill and refinery.

"We are the only sugar company in the world with that certification," said Romain, 43.

Romain joined Okeelanta two years ago after working as a food industry consultant. He also worked for Del Monte Foods and was in charge of logistics strategy at Toys R Us.

While other industries are hurting in the economic downturn, that's not true for sugar, Romain said. The packaging and distribution center employs 180 people, up from 130 employees five years ago.

"We are in a stable consumer product that doesn't get as affected by the economy, one way or another," Romain said.

Just a two-minute drive from the facility that Romain oversees is the front end of the industrial complex where the process of turning stalks of cane into sugar begins.

Angelo Archbold, 53, a 16-year Okeelanta employee, directs the mill and refinery operations. Originally from Panama, where he received a degree in electromechanical engineering and got his first job in the sugar industry, Archbold calls himself a "sugar guy."

"Once you get into sugar, you are in sugar for a lifetime," Archbold said on a recent morning. "People think we just crush the cane and turn it into sugar, but it's a lot more complicated than that."

However, he stresses that the end result is a natural product that is made from nothing but the cane.

From a metal catwalk high above the mill's floor, Archbold watches as sugar cane is brought in from the field by truck. It's unloaded 25 tons at a time and fed into the highly industrialized computer-controlled mill. It's mechanically shredded by huge metal cane knives. Next it's milled, which means water is added as the cane is mashed.

The purpose of the mill is to extract the sucrose from the cane. A stalk of cane is 13 percent sucrose and 11 percent fiber. The rest is water.

The liquid sucrose is separated from the fiber. Then the raw cane juice is heated, filtered, purified and the water is evaporated. What's left is a sweet, golden syrup. After more boiling, a rich mixture of crystals and molasses forms. The molasses is separated from the crystals, then the sugar crystals are dried and cooled before packaging.

Archbold also oversees the lab, where 10 people, including chief of chemistry Delfin Rodriguez, 64, another "sugar guy" who's been in the industry 36 years, analyze the product, checking for purity and quality.

Next, Archbold is on to the massive raw sugar warehouse where up to 180,000 tons of sugar can be stored while it awaits its turn at the refinery. A golden mountain of 65,000 tons of sugar looks like sand. It grows larger each minute as more sugar is deposited from an overhead conveyor belt. Within a few months, it will be packaged and sold across the United States.

"There is a certain kind of satisfaction knowing that we provide a staple for families. We aren't making computers or luxury items. We are providing an essential food product. And, we take pride in producing the items that make it to American dinner tables," Archbold said.

Archbold is also proud of what makes Okeelanta Corp. unique. It is the only place in the United States that produces specialty sugars like organic sugar and ECJ, evaporated cane juice, or what is called natural sugar, and Demerara, a less-processed amber sugar with large, coarse crystals.

He's also proud of the people who make it happen.

"The Florida sugar industry has been vilified by the media for decades," Archbold said. "But, from my inside view, I look around at my peers and what I see are good people who care about what they do and the land and environment."

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