



Photo credits : Biscuits Leclerc

Jean Leclerc

President and CEO,
Biscuits Leclerc

In the family for over 100 years!

Biscuits Leclerc was founded by François Leclerc (Jean Leclerc's great-grandfather) in 1905 and is still in the family after over 100 years! Thanks to its wide range of tasty products-cookies, snack bars and breakfast cereals-the Quebec City-based company has taken the world by storm!

Jean Leclerc

- » Appointed president and CEO of Biscuits Leclerc in 2003
- » Vice-president of the company from 1995 to 2003
- » Minister of government services; vice-president, Treasury Board; minister responsible for the Quebec City region
- » Member of Quebec's National Assembly (Taschereau riding), 1985-1994
- » 2008 Development Outside Quebec award (special mention), Quebec City Chamber of Commerce
- » Chairman, Quebec City 400th Anniversary Society (2008)

Biscuits Leclerc

- » Founded in 1905 by François Leclerc
- » Headquartered in Quebec City
- » 91 product flavours
- » Number of employees: 520
- » Sales in 2008: CA\$220 million
- » Industry rankings: 3rd in Canada for snack bars, 2nd for chocolate bars and 3rd for cookies
- » Exports to 20 countries account for more than 30% of the company's sales

Companies that still bear the name of their founder and are still managed by a member of the founding family are few and far between. Usually, interest dwindles by the second or third generation and the business is sold off; sometimes there is a lack of qualified successors. But the Leclerc family is different: the company's current president, Jean Leclerc, represents the fourth generation of leadership. So what's their secret? "I guess we must have a stubborn streak. It's something that gets handed down to you. By the time you get to the fourth generation, you've managed to offset any bad luck you might have had," he explains.

Jean Leclerc was raised not too far from the company's headquarters and remembers visiting the factory when he was young. "My grandfather took me and my brothers and sisters there all the time. But my dad didn't force me to take over the business. I came into it naturally. I've always found the agrifood industry fascinating."

Although its headquarters and R&D department are still in Quebec City, the company has built a number of factories in Ontario and the US. It established a foothold south of the border to take advantage of the strong US dollar-a winning move that has sheltered it from volatile financial market fluctuations in recent years.

Having a physical presence in the US also means lower transportation costs and enhanced competitiveness. Given huge swings in oil prices, it's easy to see why decentralized operations are so beneficial: the company's products are closer to consumer markets in a number of regions. Decentralization also makes a significant contribution to environmental protection and social welfare-an important area of concern for Jean Leclerc.

From cookies to chocolate bars

The Biscuits Leclerc story begins with the humble cookie. Although the company now offers multiple varieties of cookies, its product line has grown considerably. In response to consumer buying trends, snack bars and breakfast cereals were added, followed by a successful line of chocolate bars. "We're a better company now that we produce our own chocolate," says Mr. Leclerc.

Why the emphasis on snack bars? According to Mr. Leclerc, it's because the company has always kept up with changing consumer habits and dietary trends. The current demand for healthy snacks dates back to the 1960s, when living standards began to rise in emerging countries. A seemingly ubiquitous presence at recreational and sports events, snack bars have also taken the market by storm. "We branched into snack bars when this category was first developing. These were brand new markets, and we started producing snacks that were ready to eat at any time of the day or night."

The numbers speak for themselves. Biscuits Leclerc produces nearly one billion snack bars every year, and demand continues to rise as people continue to cook less. This strong and lasting trend is encouraging the company to keep moving in this direction. "We're heading towards a 'weekend cooking' lifestyle because people have less free time during the week. But they're more focused on what they're eating: they read the labels and want to know where the ingredients come from. They're also avoiding trans fats. Heightened consumer interest is very exciting for us: there's nothing more frustrating than working against a backdrop of indifference!"

"These are very exciting times for our industry because our toolbox has never been so full. We use ingredients that are available on the market, we combine them and we package them. The ingredient industry has made great strides and we have access to numerous studies showing that that's a good thing. Cranberries and 70% cocoa chocolate are good examples."

Mr. Leclerc speaks passionately about his company, about how it has changed over the years and about the challenges it faces. Even though Biscuits Leclerc does not have a huge in-house laboratory (by choice), information circulates quickly thanks to the large number of government and university studies being carried out. "Even though we're not a multinational, we have access to a wealth of information. We work extensively with Laval University, for example."

Going greener

Without too much fanfare, Biscuits Leclerc began going greener several years ago. A number of environmental considerations were incorporated into the company's production processes, including fair-trade chocolate for Oxfam Quebec and packaging materials made out of biodegradable corn. The manufacturer of the biodegradable cookie packaging has set up shop near Biscuits Leclerc's factory, reflecting one of the company's key goals: to reduce transportation requirements. Wherever possible, the company buys ingredients and supplies as close as it can to its facilities. Although almonds are still shipped in from California, oats, blueberries and apples now come mostly from Quebec's Lac Saint-Jean region instead of Western Canada. (The company purchases one million pounds of apples each year.)

According to Mr. Leclerc, local procurement is a common-sense business strategy. "Usually it means better service and better prices. It makes sense to support local suppliers."

Still, Jean Leclerc is willing to go beyond the tried and true: according to standard business practices, the company should not be operating its own warehouses or trucks or producing its own ingredients. Another case in point is its decision to build a chocolate processing plant: "This strategy will have long-term benefits. I'm not just focused on the next quarter—we're looking much further down the road!"

Cécile Gladel

