

PRESS ARTICLE

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Sidel and Niche Cocoa team up to serve millions of school children in Ghana



Niche Cocoa Industry Ltd., Ghana's largest fully integrated cocoa processor, recently signed a deal with Sidel with the intention to advance into previously uncharted territory: beverage production. The company are planning to support Ghana's School Feeding Programme by providing 5.6 million pupils with ready-to-drink (RTD) chocolate milk, aseptically packaged in 250 ml PET bottles, for 100 school days per year. In this, Niche Cocoa are relying on Sidel's long-standing expertise in aseptic PET bottling as well as their capabilities in packaging design to manage a greenfield project.

As one of Africa's fastest growing economies in 2019, Ghana continues to perform well economically with the GDP expected to grow even further in 2020. The country's economy is largely based on two export goods: gold and cocoa. In fact, Ghana is the world's second biggest cocoa producer after Ivory Coast, with the world's highest-quality bulk cocoa beans coming from the country. Currently, annual per capita chocolate consumption in Ghana is only 0.5 kilograms. This picture is most likely to change rapidly due to a growing local demand for premium consumer products that require high-end refining and marketing.

While Carbonated Soft Drinks (CSD) are strongly rooted in local consumption routines, healthier beverages, like juices and milk, currently occupy a smaller segment of the beverage market. The challenge that Niche Cocoa and other market players are facing now is, on the one hand, to reach consumers with conveniently packaged products at prices they can afford, and, on the other hand, to attract end users via packaging design and educate them on good nutritional routines to build additional market share.

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PRESS ARTICLE

Fastest-rising local cocoa processor in Ghana branches out to drinks

Niche Cocoa Industry Ltd. were founded in 2011 and currently manufacture high quality, semi-finished cocoa products for export, such as cocoa liquor, cocoa butter, cocoa cake and cocoa powder. In 2017, Niche commenced the production of chocolate for the local and international market. The company based in Tema, Ghana, near the capital, play an important role in facilitating the transfer of technical knowledge within Ghana's cocoa processing industry while improving the livelihoods of local cocoa farmers.

Today, Niche Cocoa are the fastest-rising local cocoa processor in the country. Edmund A. Poku, the company's Managing Director, explains, "With an installed processing capacity of 90,000 metric tons per year, an annual turnover of US\$120 million and about 450 employees, we are excited about the opportunity to introduce the first and only locally produced and aseptically bottled chocolate milk in Ghana. Thanks to a loan from the Dutch entrepreneurial development bank FMO in autumn 2019, Niche Cocoa were able to purchase manufacturing equipment from Sidel, which will allow us to produce chocolate drinks." These products will be sold in Ghana, bringing the company one step closer to the vision of becoming Africa's leading producer of chocolate and other cocoa products.

5.6 million school children to benefit from CSR initiative

Mr Poku continues, "Thanks to the FMO's loan, we are getting ready to produce and bottle shelf-stable, fortified chocolate milk in PET for Ghanaian school children on a daily basis under the country's recently launched 'Ghana School Feeding Programme'. We are planning to serve approximately 5.6 million children across 261 districts in a total of 9,350 schools, both primary and secondary, on 100 school days per year. With this programme, we want to provide a healthy, nutritional alternative to our people."

"We decided to partner with Sidel on this project because of our shared passion for uncompromising food and beverage quality," says Mr Poku. "What set Niche Cocoa apart on the market is our clear focus on top-quality products, combined with the flexibility to fit consumers' needs while valuing organic, regional cocoa processing," he adds. The company's commitment is strengthened by the certifications they have obtained from a wide array of organisations, including FSSC 22000, UTZ, Fair Trade, Organic and FDA as well as the Ghana Standards Authority (GSA).

PRESS ARTICLE

Absolute food safety addressed by a complete aseptic PET solution

“During Niche’s selection of a packaging machinery supplier, Sidel’s long-standing experience in aseptic PET applications and packaging played a key role in our decision. Their dedicated local sales force and after-sales service capabilities as well as the technical expertise that were evident in our business discussions simplified the choice. These latter elements, especially, helped our technical team build trust in Sidel. Their buy-in was decisive for the rest of the staff at Niche Cocoa,” highlights Mr Poku.

Ultimately, Niche Cocoa opted for a low-speed (16,000 bottles per hour) aseptic PET complete solution, which integrates Tetra Pak Processing Systems technologies and the Sidel Aseptic Combi Predis with dry preform and cap sterilisation systems, two units of Gebo OptiDry®, a sleeve labeller, a VersaFilm® Access shrink-wrapping system, and finally a stretch wrapper. Also included in Niche’s scope is Sidel’s EIT® (Efficiency Improvement Tool), a market-leading data acquisition and plant intelligence system supporting beverage companies in decreasing unplanned downtime, reducing waste and costs, and increasing factory output.

Sidel’s aseptic dry preform sterilisation technology – known as Predis – offers food safety and simplicity at the utmost. It perfectly supports the brand promise around product quality. Mr Poku adds, “We strongly believe in the environmental credentials of PET, its 100% recyclability, its affordability, its lightweight potential, and the dramatic savings in water usage and chemicals consumption made possible by Predis. Its ease of operation was very attractive to us as well, since this is our first foray into the beverage industry and the first time we will manage an aseptic packaging process.”

With 180 references installed worldwide, Sidel’s Aseptic Combi Predis is a well-proven concept that received U.S. FDA validation back in 2017 – an industry-first. Since its launch, it has successfully decontaminated more than 60 billion bottles globally while saving over 10 billion litres of water and 60,000 tons of PET.

“No other shelf-stable chocolate milk produced in Ghana is aseptically filled in PET bottles. Niche have always been an innovation-driven company with a regional focus, so opting for Sidel technology is an investment that reconfirms our values,” says Mr Poku.

Attractive and convenient PET packaging for young consumers

In addition to the state-of-the-art equipment, the Ghanaian company is also relying on Sidel’s 40-year history of bottle design and qualification. “Packaging plays a pivotal role in our

PRESS ARTICLE

marketing mix and represents one of the main enablers of our brand promise, alongside the origin of our ingredients and high product quality,” Mr Poku emphasises.

Back in 2019, Niche Cocoa visited Sidel’s factory in Italy as well as some of their liquid dairy customers’ installations in the country. The trip afforded valuable insights into the advantages PET could offer Niche’s market in Ghana. The inherent characteristics of PET were the deciding factors for Niche’s team: the flexibility of bottle size and shape, its light weight, a premium look and feel that attracts very young consumers, the protection the material offers to the beverage, the performance through a complicated supply chain, and, finally, the affordability of the material.

For their RTD chocolate milk, Niche opted for a sleek, transparent, 250 ml PET bottle, enhanced by wavy ribs that gently envelop the body of the container. This original design is intended to evoke the idea of mouth-watering ripples created by pouring chocolate into a cup of milk. This same motif will be reflected on the full-sleeve label, thereby capturing the target audience’s attention even before they taste the drink.

Both the bottle’s structure and weight (15 g) have been optimised for an ideal drinking experience: it has been designed with a lightweight 32 mm bottle neck and a StarLITE™ base, offering the potential for reduced blowing pressure. The container does not require an aluminium foil due to the neck and cap tightness, and complete food safety is assured by the aseptic dry preform and cap sterilisation solution.

Niche Cocoa’s long-term vision: Expansion to other African countries

The ‘Ghana School Feeding Programme’ is a one-of-a-kind project that involves making healthy products easily available to the younger generation within Ghana. Mary Marshall, Confectionery Operations Manager at Niche Cocoa, explains where this journey could take the company: “We constructed a new facility to house this compact, aseptic complete line. We expect this initiative to achieve measurable success by the end of 2021, after which point we will consider to install similar lines in other countries.”

For the company’s Managing Director the sky is the limit: “Our mid-term goal is not only to serve school children in Ghana, but to sell our products to everyone in the country, while our long-term strategy includes expanding to other African countries, such as South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, and the Ivory Coast. People’s health and good nutrition practices are what we seek to defend, within our own borders and beyond.”

PRESS ARTICLE



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Sidel is a leading provider of equipment and services solutions for packaging beverage, food, home and personal care products in PET, can, glass and other materials.

With over 40,000 machines installed in more than 190 countries, we have nearly 170 years of proven experience, with a strong focus on the factory of tomorrow with advanced systems, line engineering and innovation. Our 5,500+ employees worldwide are passionate about providing solutions that fulfil customer needs and boost the **performance** of their lines, products and businesses.

Delivering this level of performance requires that we stay flexible. We continuously ensure we **understand** our customers' changing challenges and commit to meeting their unique performance and sustainability goals. We do this through dialogue and by understanding the needs of their markets, production and value chains. In turn, we apply our solid technical knowledge and smart data analytics to ensure lifetime productivity reaches its full potential.

We call it **Performance through Understanding**.

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