



Fig grower
The Specialty Crops Company
upgrades to
SORTEX F technology

SORTEX F optical sorter helps 3rd generation farmer to vertically integrate and reduce sorting costs by up to 90%

London/California, November xx, 2018 – Bühler technology is enabling the world’s largest fig grower to double its processing capacity to 20,000lbs per hour and reduce increasingly expensive costs associated with sorting, by up to 90%. The SORTEX F sorter is helping The Specialty Crop Company to provide their customers with dried figs that are free from damage and foreign material, including wood, rocks, puncture vines, bird pecks, sunburn and mold.

Kevin and Diane Herman founded the California-based business in 1989 and although figs are their main product, they successfully grow kiwi, persimmons and pomegranates. Additionally they experiment with other produce and at the moment are attempting truffles and goji berries. Remarkably they also farm almonds, pistachios and walnuts and are ranked among the world’s top 25 nut-growers.

“I come from a small farming family, as does my wife,” Kevin recalls. “When I graduated college, I went to work for a farm management company, before starting my own. Over the years, the business has evolved. There’s now an even balance between owning, leasing and managing our farmland.”

Leader in dried fig production

Specialty Crop’s ranches are located in California’s Madera and Merced counties. “Our company mission is to provide consumers with healthy food that’s sustainable and tastes great. We farm about 8,000 acres, and about half of that is given over to figs. I’ve been growing figs for a long time,” Kevin admits. Ardo operates the pioneering SORTEX F optical sorter from Bühler, fitted, as standard, with SORTEX PolarVision™ – Bühler’s specialist detection system, combining two pioneering proprietary technologies, to deliver unprecedented FM detection.

SORTEX F

A new era for foreign material detection

Custom built to remove gross and subtle color defects, extraneous vegetable matter and foreign materials with pinpoint precision and ease, SORTEX F is the most hygienic optical sorter.

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Creating long-lasting partnerships.



Specialty Crops relies on Bühler's advanced optical sorting technology for food safety.

Some 5,500 tons (of the industry's 10,000 tons) of figs a year are processed at Specialty Crop's Madera plant, consisting of five main types – Mission, Conadria, Sierra, Tiger and Brown Turkey – and a fifth of the crop is grown organically. About 90% of Specialty Crop's dried whole figs are sold to leading US buyers.

Kevin describes his business as “primarily a grower, not a processor”. He adds: “At this point, we're really just a farmer, but we're becoming more and more vertically integrated. Working with Bühler and installing the SORTEX F has taken us a step further in that direction.”

Superior FM and defect detection

Food safety is extremely important for Specialty Crop, as is quality. Kevin explains: “My customers have zero tolerance for foreign materials, as their products are used for making pastes, concentrates and diced figs which go on to be used in foods such as cereals, jams, sauces, fillings and the famous Fig Newtons cookies. For consumer pack varieties, aesthetics as well as safety is important. This is why the SORTEX F is vital for our business.

“Our figs are harvested from the field and brought straight onto the cleaning line. The contamination rate is about 15%-20%, three quarters of which is because of foreign materials (FM) and a quarter due to defects. Harvesting entails gathering figs off the orchard floor, so a lot of FM is brought into the plant with the figs. FM include small pieces of wood, rocks, sticks and the barbed seeds from puncture vines (*tribulus terrestris*), that can grow in orchards.

“The figs can also be imperfect. For example, they can be smashed or have dark spots, or blemishes caused by bird pecks or weather-induced mold – or even sunburn in hotter years. After mechanically cleaning the product, the contamination entering the sorter is around 8%-10%.”

Quality assurance – vastly reduced labour costs

As Kevin explains, quality control requirements can vary from one fig variety to another. “As a grower I must meet an incoming tolerance, but the packer must meet a much more stringent outgoing tolerance level.

“And if we're dealing with whole figs, going into a consumer package directly, they must look perfect. For paste and industrial use, tolerances for defects are greater, since they can be ground up and still used. FM aren't allowed – neither is mold. The sorting criteria are easy to set up on the SORTEX F and the sensitivities settings can be adjusted, so that I can easily meet my customers' specifications. Besides this, we can now do it with 3 hand sorters instead of needing 24. Before we got the sorter, some figs with defects were getting through our handpicking tables. But not anymore, so customer complaints are down.”

Farmers have been struggling with a shortage of workers and increasing labor costs, so to be able to stay in their line of business they are having to look for alternative solutions. Kevin continues, “We have 150 employees throughout the year, but need up to 700 during harvest. Finding employees has become difficult and it's also getting more expensive to employ them. Bühler's sorting technology has enabled us to keep our labor cost under control, plus I can trust the SORTEX F to accurately and reliably sort our figs 24/7.”

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Double capacity – peerless customer service

Kevin adds: “We are always looking to improve our processes with reliable, innovative technology that can bring benefits to us and our customers. And we wouldn’t be without the SORTEX F, as it has enabled us to achieve far higher yields, with much less rejection of good product, while delivering a greater accept quality.”

Stephen Jacobs, Business Development Manager North America at Bühler Group, comments: “The advanced camera technology used on the SORTEX F can reliably differentiate between good and bad product, enabling problematic FM and defective product to be accurately removed.

“Furthermore, Specialty Crop’s choice to invest in the larger F2 model has enabled them to sort 20,000lbs (9,000kgs) of figs per hour – twice what they were able to sort previously.”

So, why did Kevin choose Bühler’s Sortex technology? “We grow almonds and I was talking to a few almond handlers about our issues when sorting figs. One of them suggested that I talk to Bühler. I’m delighted I did, because the technology is fantastic and their customer service is peerless.”

Contact Us

If you have any questions or would like to find out more Bühler’s SORTEX experts are available in your region to give you advice on how to improve your productivity and your profit with our highly efficient line of optical sorters.

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