



Ground Zero

On the production line

There is more to processing hake than meets the eye.
Fishing Industry News Southern Africa investigates I&J's
 upgraded Woodstock factory

There's a slight kerfuffle in the change room of I & J's Woodstock head office in Cape Town: my protective pants are too small. Not even Mick Jagger would



A crane gets things moving aboard a factory freezer at South Arm Four quay.

Top left and right: Staff at I&J's recently-upgraded Woodstock facility are subject to stringent hygiene checks.

squeeze into these leggings, and so a new pair is sought. No question of entering this facility without them; I&J's upgraded processing plant has more certification than a nuclear submarine, which explains the stringent dress code: regulation socks, Wellington boots, white button coat, earplugs, hair net, even a beard net for my colleague from parliament. We look like a team of microbiologists from the DRC.

My next pair of protective pants are big enough for Bakkies Botha – they flop down to my knees – but as it turns out I am in luck: I have the same size waist as I&J managing director Jonty Jankovich, whose protective pants just happen to be hanging up nearby. Five minutes later I stride into I&J's Woodstock Primary Processing factory wearing the boss's pants.

It is an auspicious start to a tour of the epicentre of Cape Town's fish processing industry. I&J's Woodstock factory is still basking in the afterglow of a R67-million facelift. At full capacity it now employs around 450 people and hums with state-of-the-art fish processing machinery that drowns out, at least for a while, any scepticism about South Africa's economy.

The first thing you do on entering the factory is step into a puddle – a boot-cleaning splash pool. Then comes a hand wash, the first of many, using a knee-operated tap. Our tour then takes us into a holding area where bins of fish lie in wait, their fins protruding out of shallow graves of ice. Quality Assurance manager Tanya Gentry points out a battery bay for the factory's fleet of forklifts, and a contraption that makes ice – lots of ice. "This is the holding area. The fish comes in over there" – Gentry points to a large roller door. Every incoming bin is colour coded according to a freshness (age profile of the fish code displayed on the wall outside the chill room where fish is stored until it is sorted and graded into specific sizes for production.

From there we move into a giant 'chill room' that leads to the sorting and grading in-feed area. We are following the processing trail, accompanying a school of iced hake that not too long ago was cruising around at the edge of the continental shelf. It is exhilarating, in a faintly disturbing kind of way: the ruthless efficiency of a well-oiled industrial process that transforms a school of hake into meal-sized premium fillets in less time than it takes to toast a sandwich.

In the Sorting & Grading Processing Area we are grateful for our earplugs; the place is humming. A forklift hoists fish into de-icer, which sends it down a shoot onto a conveyor-belt where it is graded according to weight and sorted into bins. Gentry points out an ID ticket illustrating full traceability of the fish for MSC pur-



Quality Assurance manager Tanya Gentry inspects packaged goods fresh off the assembly line.



Two media visitors take a break during a guided tour of I&J's giant trawl net store at South Arm Four.



An I&J skipper shows off some of the state-of-the-art gadgetry aboard one of I&J's new factory freezers.

poses. This tells us time, grader, size and vessel name of the fish being graded. As we move around the facility we see humans are graded too – according to hair net colour: quality control wear navy blue, production team wear black. In this way managers can identify team members amid the sea of white uniforms.

Meanwhile the fish are sliding ever closer to their fillet boxes, now moving from a 'hopper' onto a baader and trio processing machine. This is ground zero for the deep water hake – the place it finally gets sliced up into two fillets and skinned. There are two trim lines and three pack lines, arranged in a vast warehouse criss-crossed by elevated stairwells from where we survey the action. Production can process up to 25 to 35 tons per shift. Each line has a metal detector which is the only critical control point in the facility – there to safeguard against machine leakage, not matter how minuscule. In addition to this, hourly on line QC inspections are conducted and every product and batch produced undergoes microbiological testing to guard against nasty bacteria. The final product is then packaged, in this case into a 4kg box destined for France as 'Merlu Blanc du Cap'. One can almost hear the bistro music on the Champs-Elysée.

The journey is not over yet, however. From here the box travels to a cold storage facility in Paarden Island to await export. By the time it reaches the bottom of a Parisian stomach it will have passed through several hands, several machines, and traversed much of the globe. Between 250 and 280 staff work in one of the

production facilities at any one time at full capacity.

It will also have passed a series of quality control tests. "If you look at our systems and controls we are the only ones who test every product and batch every day," explains Gentry, adding that the company benefits from its own independent SANAS-accredited microbiological lab, MICRON. The facility layout is also unusual, horseshoe-shaped rather than a straight linear design. The result can be confusing to first time visitors: "They call it the spider web," says Gentry, who has the challenging job of clarifying technical aspects for eagle-eyed European customers. "It's not easy when I have to do the flow diagrams showing how everything fits together, but it's a bit easier to understand for those of us involved in the implementation."

Back in the change room I am almost reluctant to give up my safety clothes, but it is time to face the real world. I give up the hair net, the earplugs, the protective eye wear, and finally even the MD's pants. I leave with a deep appreciation for the scale of investment at the heart of the country's fishing industry. A visit here should be an obligatory stop for anybody who doubts South Africa's ability to build on a world class industrial base, no matter the stiff economic headwinds sweeping in off the sea.



I&J staff members look up briefly from the 'trimming line' at I&J's processing plant in Woodstock