Valka

VOICE

Newsletter - December 2020

DALVÍK TECH SHOWCASE

MURMANSK MILESTONE

WORLD'S LARGEST SALMON FACTORY

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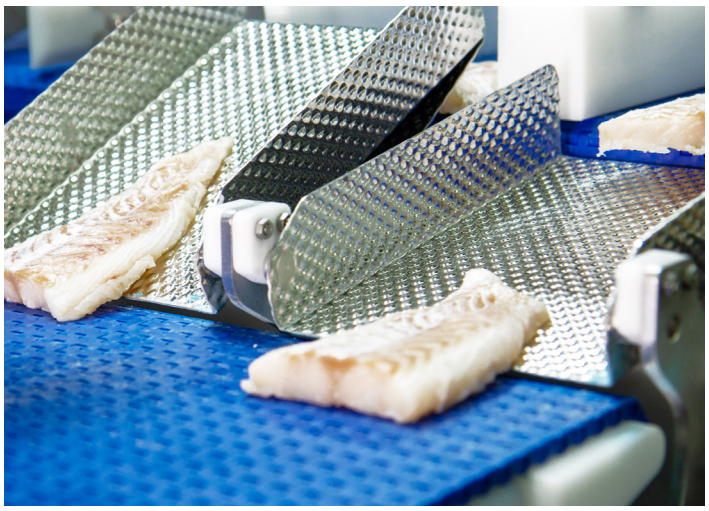
– ALL ABOUT PRECISION

PORTIONING GIVES CUSTOMERS
WHAT THEY WANT

TAKING RAPIDFISH
TO A NEW LEVEL

FASTER HANDLING
FOR FRESH WHITEFISH



IQF GRADERS – ALL ABOUT PRECISION

A pair of new grader models introduced this year offer new levels of flexibility in batching and automatic packing of a variety of IQF production, including fillets and smaller portions. Both contribute to boosting productivity and doing away with waste – including eliminating overpack.

With up to four lanes and capable of accepting throughput from either fully automatic or conventional circular infeed sources, Valka's High-Speed Portion Grader sorts products according to weight and dimensions, and instead of the usual pneumatic arms, a gentler approach has been taken. Products are allowed to slide through an opening mechanism at each gate, which allows for a smooth flow into the buffer.

The product flow is kept at a steady rate with sensors and accelerator conveyors ensuring a distance is maintained between portions as they are steered to the correct gates, while visual imaging accurately sorts by size and dynamic in-weighing records precise portion weights.

The High-Speed Portion Grader is a flexible piece of equipment, suitable for either bulk packaging or smaller cartons.

One of the early adopters of Valka's Aligner Packing Robot is Sauðárkrókur fishing and processing company FISK Seafood, which is looking forward to a short payback time on this investment in its shore-based processing facility.

"The level of automation will also enable direct gains with labour costs," said Asmundur Baldvinsson, manager of FISK Seafood land-based production, commenting on the company's €600,000 investment and citing batching precision as the most significant benefit of the system.

"I'm quite confident that we will achieve a short payback time."

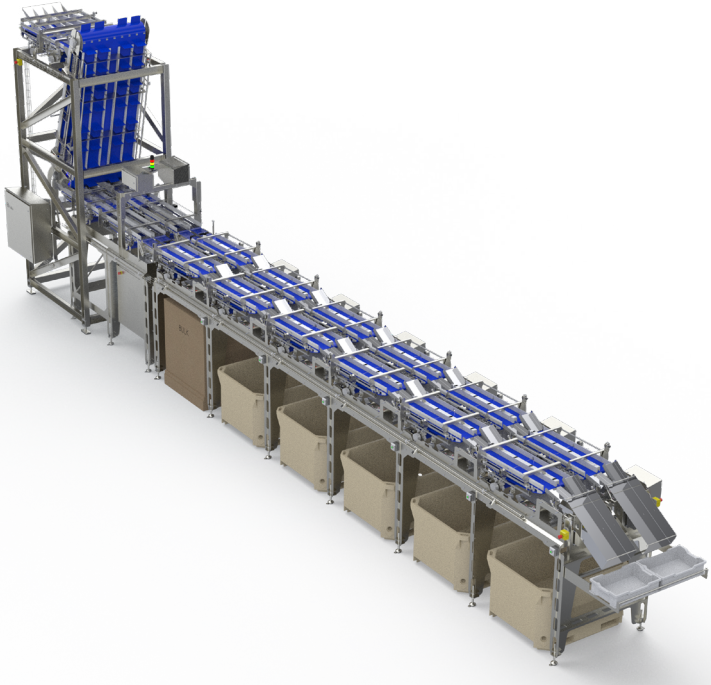
Designed to handle IQF fillets and portions, the Aligner Packing Robot's selling point is the efforts that have gone into eliminating overpack, using sophisticated game theory algorithms instead of the accepted method of relying on a statistical best guess.

The Aligner Packing Robot is fed with the specific data of every portion as it is weighed, with this information provided far enough in advance for the software to apply game theory principles, so that it is constantly analysing the precise composition of the product weights coming its way. This allows it to systematically optimise the optimum combinations based on accurate piece weights, and the result is virtually zero giveaway weight.

As traditional pneumatic arms could damage glazing and potentially damage delicate portions such as tail pieces, the system comes with a unique carousel. The built-in cars of the carousel carefully pick up and transport the product. An integrated cartesian robot then gently slides the portion for delivery directly above the final packaging. The system allows products to travel gently and smoothly through the carousel, without attrition or breakage of the product.

It has the ability to handle portions or fillets ranging from 80 to 800mm in length, and achieves a throughput rate of up to 80 pieces per minute – and can grade production on weight, dimensions of quality criteria.

"We appreciate for the trust Fisk Seafood has shown us with this system. Companies like Valka would not exist without partners willing to try things for the first time," said Valka's Guðjón Ingi Guðjónsson.



TAKING RAPIDFISH TO A NEW LEVEL

A sophisticated suite of software is there in the background behind Valka's production hardware, seamlessly managing the whole of processing and production, starting with the raw material entering a processing plant, and managing everything right up the product being sold and shipped to the customer.

Valka's expanding software team have been developing an overhaul of Rapidfish, although director of development Ívar Meyvantsson stressed that this isn't a wholesale replacement of a suite of software that has already demonstrated its efficiency, but a redesign that increases the general ease of use as new modules are gradually added.

"The first modules we introduced were at the new Samherji factory in Dalvík in August last year, with their Rapidfish system incorporating new quality control and then weight calibration modules," he explained.

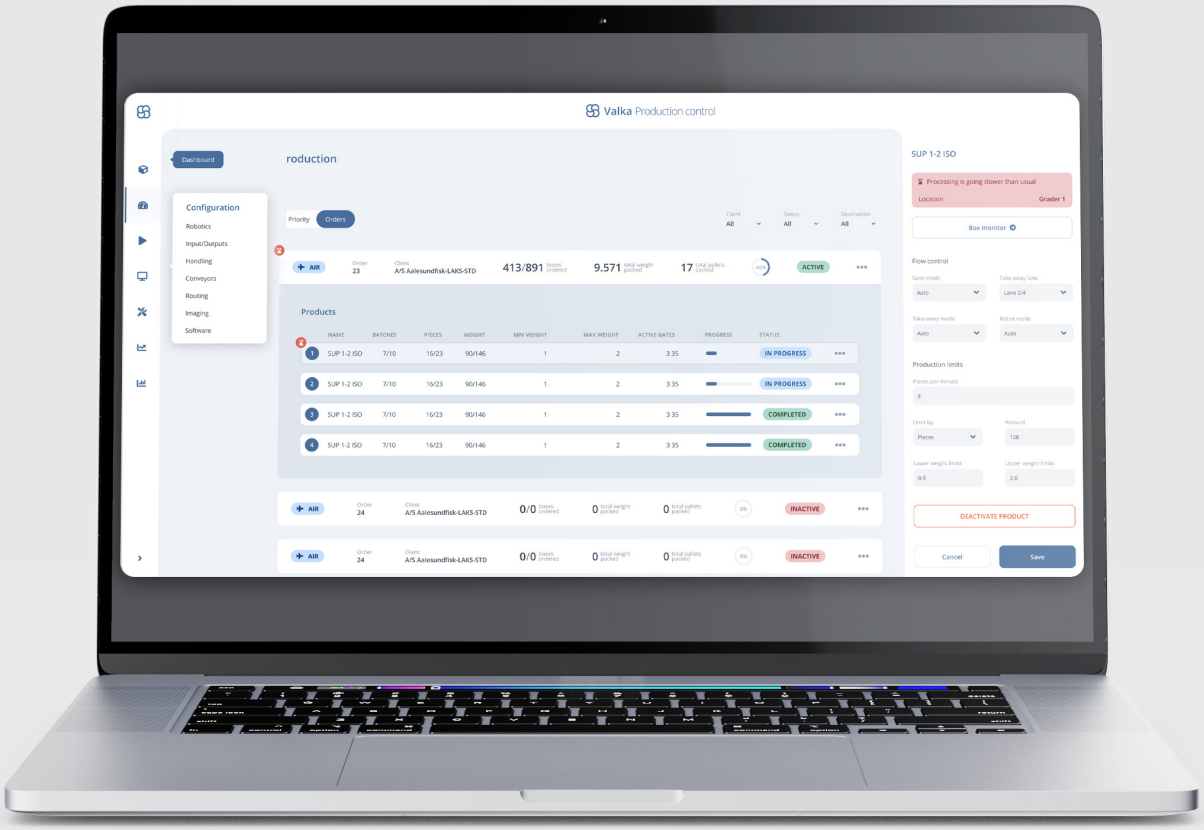
"Right now we are putting a great deal of effort into a streamlined order management interface for the new Salmar factory in Norway when it starts production. That will be a real showcase for the new Rapidfish features."

The emphasis is on simplifying processes for the user, refining the presentation of information and developing possibilities for new synergies between facets of the system.

"The redesign offers new options for scaling, from displaying the Rapidfish interface on a large screen in a control room, to opportunities for display on a phone screen for mobile access, allowing access from any location. Data becomes more easily accessible, and we are building the foundation for a greater range of services, including preventive maintenance as potential faults are flagged up at an early stage."

The open source architecture and web-based infrastructure that have been hallmarks of the Rapidfish system will continue to provide flexibility and economy as Rapidfish keeps growing as a management system with unique properties and capabilities.

"This means that we can offer a robust, dynamic system that meets the needs of the largest fish processors, as well as being easily scalable, all the way to Mom & Pop businesses at the other end of the industry scale," Ívar Meyvantsson said.



Salmar's new InnovaNor factory is set to be the world's most efficent salmon production plant when production begins

WORLD-LEADING SALMON PRODUCTION

Landing the contract for Salmar's new InnovaNor facility is a serious vote of confidence for Valka, according to Kristján Kristjánsson, manager at the company's branch in Norway, not least as this is set to outstrip the rest of the industry in salmon production volumes with a massive 120,000 tonne annual capacity.

"These guys are very progressive, and this is a new generation of salmon production – but without relying on groundbreaking technology," he explained.

However, what is groundbreaking about the factory being built at Lenvik in Norway's Troms region is the way a variety of technologies has been meticulously analysed and arranged to ensure a smooth flow through production, with significant efforts made to eliminate bottlenecks, all under the control of Valka's suite of management software that oversees the process from harvest all the way through to the finished products being dispatched.

"Each element of production has a higher capacity than the previous section, so moving through the process, there's no pooling of raw material. Nothing has to wait in a bin for the next stage to catch up, and there are no buffers," he said.

At the heart of the system are two heavyweight graders that operate in tandem, setting the pace, and Salmar opted for this double arrangement on the basis that two machines working well within their capacity is a more secure and efficient option than a single machine running a little beyond flat-out.

"The thinking is that having these running at 85% of their throughput capacity is better than not quite enough machines working at 110%," Kristján Kristjánsson said, commenting that this the benefit of this spare capacity is in greater flexibility and more reliable operation.

"Of one drops out for a while, that's no problem as the other picks up the slack," he said. *"If you have one grader running at full speed, you've already ruled out any options for expansion. Two graders cope easily with the throughput, offer possibilities for later expansion and it makes maintenance so much easier, without having to halt production to deal with any minor hold-ups."*

The production arrangement developed for the InnovaNor factory accepts fish direct from slaughter, with the Valka semi-automatic graders feeding fish to the row of Baader gutting machines, tracking them through the gutting process and with constant quality checks taking place.

"The gutting machines have inbuilt imaging technology. The cameras inside the gutting machines monitor quality automatically, and after grading there's no more manual handling of the fish unless there's a problem somewhere," he said.

HEAVYWEIGHT GRADERS

The graders at the centre of the process have several roles, distributing fish through the rest of the factory depending on size, while also pulling out fish that are rejected after passing through the gutting process. These are routed to manual checks and any required handling, before heading back to the graders and into the system again.

The packing stations at the far end of the processing line are designed along the same lines as every other part of the process, with excess capacity to eliminate a need for buffering. No fish going through the system is held up before the next section is ready for it. The fifty 20kg boxes per minute capacity – a tonne a minute – is enough for one of the two packing stations to cope with the load if the other is held up.

Packing is direct into polystyrene cold boxes, with the packing stations ordering boxes as required from the packaging store. Each box is weighed and scanned before being filled, then weighed a again before a layer of ice, closed with a lid and strapped – all of which is carried out automatically at speed that's almost to fast for the eye to follow. Each box gets its own unique ID, with a number, quality and amount recorded, providing traceability all the way through the system, while a check-weighing system automatically pulls out any box that isn't correct so that it can be corrected manually and fed back into the system.

SOFTWARE SUITE

As well as the hardware that Valka and other suppliers contributed to the InnovaNor factory, behind this is a whole suite of management software that steers everything from the gutting machines to the robotic palletising system.

"There's a lot of machine learning in this – such as the robot knowing exactly what is coming before it gets there," Kristján Kristjánsson said, commenting that despite the speed and efficiency of the InnovaNor setup, there is little that is new technology – but instead a large number of minor improvements and refinements, along with the pool approach, combine to provide an exceptionally high capacity system.

"Salmar weren't looking for automation for its own sake. They didn't want experimental technology, and weren't looking for anything flashy. Whenever we suggested automation, we had to justify it and if there was a case for it, no problem. There's a reason for every piece of equipment here," he said.

"Salmar aren't your average customer. They're demanding and also very businesslike. What they liked was that we listened to them. We weren't just going to them and showing what we had to offer, but instead we were looking for ways to work with them on getting it right," he said.

"This is also the biggest operation of its kind in the world, and we've also learned a huge amount from them. Right now we're building the factory, installation starts in February and Salmar aim to be in full production at the factory in Lenvik in May 2021. We have supplied three salmon facilities in Norway before. The Salmar's InnovaNor factory is going to be a real showcase for what Valka can do in bringing together and managing known technology to come up with something outstanding."

Production flows are designed to eliminate pooling – and there are no buffers

DALVÍK FACTORY IS TECH SHOWCASE

There's no question that Samherji's new processing plant on the quayside at Dalvík in the north of Iceland represents the latest in fish processing technology.

According to Gestur Geirsson, who heads Samherji's land-based production, there had been a real need to upgrade as the original building dated back to 1935, and although it had been extended and maintained over the years, there were too many constraints preventing the company from making a serious step into the future.

The decision was to start from scratch, with a suite of new ideas that would bring the Dalvík operation up to date, with all the accompanying benefits for the staff and quality of Samherji's products.

"The factory came first. Then the walls," Gestur Geirsson said, commenting that the first step was to design systems that would meet production requirements, and the building itself was then designed around the factory.

"It helped that we had installed one of Valka's waterjet cutting systems at our factory in Akureyri back in 2015, and in 2018 we installed two more. So we were already familiar with the technology and what it could achieve," he said.

"The market is looking for more precision in production, we wanted much greater flexibility, and a key requirement was to improve working conditions for staff, to provide a better workplace."

The flexibility aspect has already shown its worth as Samherji's production has shifted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the sharp downturn in the restaurant trade. More of production is routed to the retail sector, which requires a substantially greater level of precision in the products it requires.

"The major retailers are looking for highly specific products that fit their product lines, so the precision the Valka systems offer means that we can meet their requirements, as well as giving them a greater variety of choice. This technology means that we can meet each customer's needs," he said, adding that close to half of production is currently exported fresh, while the processing systems give the company the option to be highly nimble in switching or adapting to suit market circumstances.

Options are there for a variety of products coming off the far end of the production line, from straightforward fillets to a practically endless options for portions, loins and pieces tailored within specific requirements, and with options for fresh, frozen or IQF – with possibilities to make rapid changes when needed.

"It has taken some years to develop this, working with Valka and other suppliers, and we're still learning how to use these systems," Gestur Geirsson said.

"It's also a huge step forward, as well as a highly challenging venture. But that's the enjoyable side of it – taking on a challenge and getting to grips with something new."

He commented that throughout the process of building and outfitting the 9000 square metre factory there has been a long series of challenges and obstacles to overcome, while taking a new approach to many aspects of the way fish is processed. A key requirement was to do away with monotonous jobs and heavy lifting.

"That's all gone, and instead of stacking boxes, we have those people in roles that are more supervisory, ensuring that production is smooth and without any interruptions. We also wanted to eliminate the constant stacking up of raw material ahead of the heading machine, then queuing for the filleting machine, and so on all the way through. If raw material is kept waiting, it loses quality, and we wanted an uninterrupted flow through the process," he said
"The aim was to minimise handling and eliminate waiting, and we've solved all the problems to achieve that."

While the concept of the factory didn't change a great deal once

the basic outline had been decided, it was inevitable that technological advances would present new ideas, and during the three-year construction period new ideas were incorporated into the layout as they became available. These include systems put to use for the first time – including routing to the IQF system, a new grading arrangement after freezing and new technology in the packaging areas.

While Samherji's Dalvík factory is very much at the leading edge of today's technology – and around half of the ISK6 billion cost of the new plant has gone into technology – Gestur Geirsson doesn't rule out more change to come.

"We wanted to build for the future and the building is good for a hundred years, and we've just taken a step in the technological revolution. There seems to be a major leap forward every ten years, and in this world of computers it's not easy to predict what will come next. We could be looking at the machines and the management software talking directly to the trawlers," he suggested.

"We're still learning how to use these systems, but the technology has enabled us to provide our staff with better working conditions, increase throughput, and gives us a greater flexibility. This includes the options of widening the range from only cod and haddock, so we could be processing more saithe and other species before long."

FLAGSHIP FACTORY

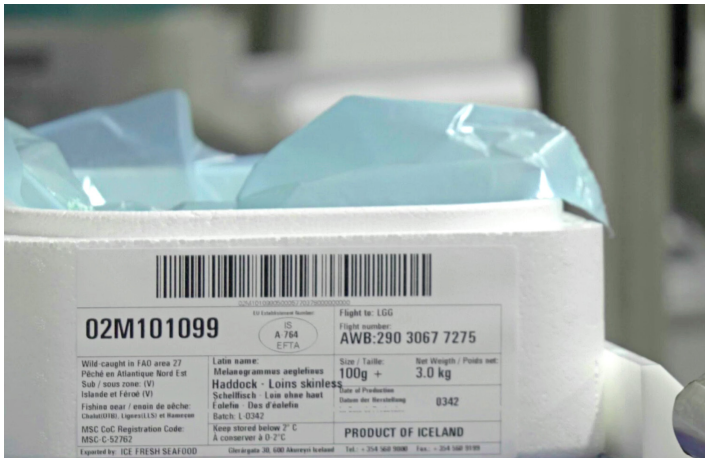
Samherji's Dalvík factory represents a flagship project for Valka, and managing director Helgi Hjálmarsson is satisfied with the outcome – not least because the customer is also satisfied.

"We worked together on this very closely to get it exactly right, and after the factory had been commissioned, I asked if there was anything at all they looked back on and would have wanted to do differently, and the answer was no. But from there the key objective was get people well trained on the system and fine tune it to optimise performance," he said.

Valka and Samherji had worked together to update many of the systems at the company's factory in Akureyri, including introducing waterjet portioning systems, packing graders and other innovations, so there was already a working relationship between them, making Valka the obvious choice of key contractor for the new factory in Dalvík.

"They are great to work with," he said. *"Samherji are demanding as a customer and if something's not right, then you hear about it right away. But they also have extremely competent and knowledgeable*

The precision of the Valka systems provides the opportunity to offer retailers a greater variety of product choice



Around half of the cost of the new Samherji factory has gone into the technology inside its walls

The new Samherji factory in Dalvík is a showcase for what Valka does best, according to Helgi Hjálmarsson

staff who bring their own ideas to the project – and it's when you have those detailed discussions with people who really know their stuff that you get the best outcomes."

"We brought the building blocks, but the arrangement of how all this works together has been a co-operative effort and it's rewarding to see that the factory layout came first and the building was then designed to fit, rather than the usual approach, which is the other way around".

He commented that there was a strong emphasis on eliminating any potential bottlenecks and to ensure an even flow of fish through production – to the extent that there are no buffers where raw material or products can pile up.

"A factory this sophisticated also needed comprehensive management software, and this manages production as a whole. The thinking is to eliminate queueing and intermediate buffering by managing production in a way that portions are only cut when there's a route open for it to the next stage, and ensuring that we have this clear flow has been very successful – it's very efficient."

With four waterjet portioning machines, the factory has a daily capacity of 80 to 120 tonnes, depending on the composition of the raw material, all relying heavily on automation.

"Samherji aren't buying into automation for its own sake," Helgi Hjálmarsson said. *"They have gone for this equipment because we were able to make the economic case for it. They could see the benefits and that it works, while a greater amount of staff time now goes into monitoring processes instead of stacking boxes. As an example, it's important that fillets entering the waterjet portioning machine lie correctly on the conveyor, so there's a member of staff at that position ensuring that they are correctly aligned. But that's the last planned point at which that fish needs to be touched by a human hand. From there it's portioned, graded and routed automatically through the rest of the process without having to be touched."*

He added that the Samherji factory is already a showcase for what Valka is able to do, and with its four portioning machines, this is the largest of its kind using the company's own equipment, along with Vélfag and Baader Ísland processing equipment, a Marel whole fish grader and Samey's palletising robotics. In contrast, the Murman Seafood installation was a larger project for Valka, but with a greater variety of equipment from other suppliers.

"Samherji have done everything right in designing the building, and everything is very well thought out. The factory is running well, although there's some fine-tuning still being done and they are familiarising themselves with all the options the system and the management software offer. It's looking good and when we see the figures, I've no doubt that the numbers will show that this is the most efficient whitefish processing plant in the world – and now we are seeing that what we have done for whitefish also needs to be applied to salmon processing. That's the next step," he said.

FASTER HANDLING FOR FRESH WHITEFISH

A new approach to grading gutted whole whitefish is growing in popularity in Norway, most recently with Valka's installation of a grading and handling system for Myre Fiskemottak in the north of Norway. After six months in operation, Myre has already handled 6000 tonnes of fish.

"This is for handling fresh gutted fish and Myre Fiskemottak were looking for a higher capacity system when they came to us," said Kristján Kristjánsson, manager of Valka's branch in Norway.

With two lanes, each with gates for nine grades and species, this is a semi-automatic system that channels fish direct to the polystyrene boxes they are exported in. Each box is scanned and weighed, and the date, species, grade, weight data is held in the management system, as well as printed onto the label attached to each box.

"The grading system works faster than the factory can keep up with, as there's no automated icing and palletising, so that's done manually and that's where the bottleneck is," he said.

He added that the Myre Fiskemottak system uses more automation than most plants in the north of Norway, and no other reception facility in the region has handled as much fish as this one over the last year.

"It's more productive and faster than other plants and this is one of the largest fish buyers in the north. They have a new building and were looking to make their handling more efficient, so we listened to what they were looking for and adapted what we could offer so that it would fit their building," he said.

PORTIONING SYSTEM TO GIVE CONSUMERS THE PRODUCTS THEY WANT

Valka had planned to present its Water-Jet Cutter for pre-rigor salmon at the Seafood Processing Global in Brussels this year, until the Covid pandemic forced a change of plans. All the same, this hasn't stopped Belgian producer Gadus from being impressed with the water-jet cutter's capabilities – impressed enough to place an order for this new cutting system for both salmon and whitefish.

Gadus expects that the innovative system, which offers far more options than conventional cutting technology, will significantly increase production flexibility in multi-species processing. This step-change in technology is expected to allow Gadus to put its focus more intensively on product development with their partners, with possibilities to offer many new portion types to the market.

"We're grateful for the trust Gadus has placed in Valka and our capability to develop and implement disruptive technology that will serve their objective to deliver outstanding products," said Valka area sales manager Daniel Niddam.

"Gadus delivers only the best products from select raw materials, and we are proud to play a part in that."

Scheduled for installation and launch at the end of 2020, the Valka Water-Jet Cutter uses a dual X-ray camera system for 3D scanning, identifying pin bones and producing an image with the exact required angle of cut for maintaining maximum yield.

A key innovation is the incorporation of twin tilting cutting robots that can accurately follow the curve on each side of the bones.

This opens up a wealth of options for the development of new products and portion types.

Up to now, processors have also had to wait for fish to pass beyond the pre-rigor stage for post-rigor deboning of fillets – but this new technology offers the option of pin bone removal immediately after filleting, for both skinless and skin-on fillets, which immediately adds to the shelf life of fresh products.

"We are pleased with this contract with Valka and very excited to make the most of the solution Valka is delivering," said Gadus CEO Philip Duyck.

"This plays a key role in our transformation plans and our ability to secure long-term contracts with our retail partners. Also, it is great to see that the teams have been working together in a very efficient way despite the Covid 19 situation. A big thank you to the Valka team for their great collaboration and effort."

Gadus has a long-established reputation for the exceptionally high quality of fish products, has recently responded to changing market demands by embarking on a transformation process and articulating a long-term company vision.

Alongside its quality reputation, Gadus is known for being a leader and the new robot-controlled portioning system will place the company perfectly to utilise each fillet more effectively, enabling it to offer novel product types that would be difficult or impossible to produce otherwise.

The ability to cut any angled or curved pattern optimising the use and yield of each fish. As an example, as well as cutting several fixed-weight retail portions from a salmon fillet, the system can simultaneously cut numerous small, cubed poke portions from the belly and tail parts, formerly a highly labour-intensive task. Previous systems could only cut parallel lines.

As part of its development work, Gadus examined its value chain and built a solid relationship with some international food retailers. The addition of the new portioning system to Gadus' production capacity will further strengthen existing strong bonds with customers by moving closer to consumers and offering products they expect to see.

For Valka, this is the latest step in a continuing process of development, not least as the company seeks to position itself increasingly on the market for salmon processing.

"It's our long-term goal at Valka to move beyond whitefish processing, and the Water-Jet Cutter portioning machine is a major step in that direction," explained Valka CEO Helgi Hjálmarsson.

"We're excited to be working with Gadus – and also to start working with the salmon industry in streamlining their production to both best utilise the fish and to maximise value."

COULDN'T ASK FOR BETTER PARTNERS

"Sometimes you build up a genuinely close involvement with a project at a personal level,' said Valka's Pálmar Sveinn Ólafsson. 'This was one of those projects – and this one is pretty close to my heart."

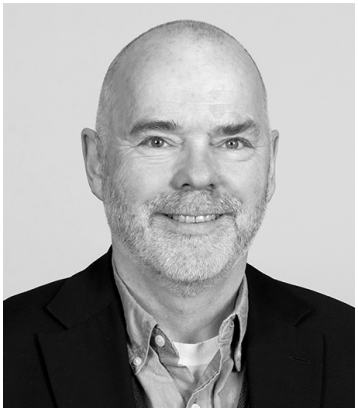
One of the first high-tech processing plants to be constructed under the Russian Federation's investment quotas programme, designed to boost country's seafood sector as a whole, the Murman Seafood factory in Murmansk started production earlier this year.

For Valka this project was a real milestone, the company's first major project carried out in Russia, acting as the main contractor for the installation as a whole, plus the final stages coincided with the arrival of Covid-19.

The story started when Kristján Kristjánsson, Valka's process engineer based in Norway, responded to an enquiry from Murmansk company Murman Seafood, which was looking to move to new, modern production. A preliminary sketch drawn up at that first meeting became the basis for a detailed engineering study carried out by Valka –which then became the contract to go ahead with the factory for the new building being planned by Murman Seafood.

"This building ended up being designed around the factory," Pálmar explained. "The building also turned out to be larger than they had originally planned, to provide the space the sophisticated processing systems needed – and they were thinking big right from the outset."

For the Valka team, the Murman Seafood installation was a pilot project that has become a success story as the challenges of bringing together a complex array of equipment came together. As well as Valka's own systems, other suppliers were also brought in to complete the picture.



Pálmar Sveinn Ólafsson

"In the proposals we put forward to the customer, we included in every instance a choice of equipment supplier, so it was up to Murman Seafood's people to visit them and decide which supplier they preferred. So we finally brought together a dozen suppliers, from Iceland, Italy, Denmark and elsewhere. There were forty containers shipped to Murmansk with equipment, plus we co-ordinated six articulated trucks bringing equipment from Italy and three coming from Denmark," he said, adding that this presented challenges in ensuring that every piece of customs paperwork was correct as everything was shipped across borders.

At the heart of the Murman Seafood factory is Valka's Rapidfish software, which manages production from raw material intake all the way through to dispatch of finished products. Valka also sup-

The Murman Seafood factory in Murmansk is one of the first of a new generation of seafood processing plants in Russia

plied the whole fish grader, trimming lines and waterjet cutter, as well as the portion grader and system for routing fresh product. A single lane packing grader handles fresh fillets or portions, placing these in trays or boxes, while a dual lane packing grader deals with IQF fillets.

The factory can handle fresh landings, and the two defrosting tanks ensure that seafrozen fish can also be used to process around fifty tonnes in each shift. Production is fed by four filleting lines incorporating Vélfag filleting machines, from where processing becomes both complex and highly sophisticated.
"In terms of groundfish production, there isn't anything this factory doesn't do," he said.

Production capacity ranges from fillets in standard shatterpacks that go to catering and fast-food outlets in Europe, to a wide range of fillets, portions and bite-sized pieces that go through the Skaginn 3X IQF system to be batched in to anything from 10kg bags to smaller consumer packs ready for a supermarket's chiller cabinet.

As well as Skaginn 3X, Danish companies Cabinplant, Seagain, Hillerslev and DSI supplied components that slotted into the overall system that is capable of switching easily between production modes to suit customer and market requirements, and which can deliver fresh as well as frozen products as required.

Completion and commissioning were marginally delayed, and this became a lower key occasion than had been intended, courtesy of the pandemic. Plans to showcase by both Murman Seafood and Valka to present the factory and its capabilities at the Seafood Expo Global were nixed as events and travel around the world came to a halt, but production began as expected.
"Starting up a new factory like this in the middle of a pandemic is truly a challenge. Several items have taken a longer time than originally expected," Kristján Kristjánsson said, adding that while the pandemic hasn't put back production, it has meant that it got off to a more gradual start than had been planned.
"It's going well for them now, and there are fine quality products coming out of the factory in Murmansk. Murman Seafood are taking a very professional approach to starting up the new factory and we can already see their determination to have the best product quality, and this is the kind of focus leads to the most efficient factories. I am proud to have worked on this project with the great people in Murman Seafood and I can already see that they will have a long-term success."

The opening of the Murman Seafood factory has attracted interest at the highest levels

Valka's Rapidfish software is at the heart of the Murman Seafood factory

The Governor of Murmansk Region Andrei Chibis along with representatives from the Federal Fisheries Agency, the Federation council and speaker of the regional Duma Sergei Dubovoy attended the formal commissioning ceremony.

Iceland's ambassador to Russia Árni Thór Sigurðsson making a speech in Russian attracted plenty of attention in the local media as he highlighted the achievement made possible by co-operation between Icelandic technology providers such as Valka and forward-looking companies like Murman Seafood.

"They were thinking big from the start and this is is the largest factory of its kind in northern Russia, and it has been clear that Murman Seafood were determined to make the best possible job they could of this. Working practices are outstanding and they have been highly professional in every way, including attention to detail in completing the factory's surroundings and the staff facilities. This is a factory that could be anywhere in Europe," Pálmar Ólafsson said.

"This was a real learning experience and we took back a lot of lessons from working in this factory – and we couldn't have asked for better partners to work with."

ALL ABOUT OPERATIONAL SECURITY AND PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE

With a long background in computing and technology, director of service **Sigríður Olgeirsdóttir** made the jump from the banking sector to fish processing by joining Valka, commenting that the values are the same.

"It's about ensuring security in production," she said. "Valka's customers are working with perishable raw material and they work with tight supply chains, so losing production for any length of time is not an option."

As Valka has grown, the requirement for service has expanded with it and the service team is available 24/7 – which is essential now that Valka systems are in operation in so many time zones.

Much of the service team's work is done remotely, diagnosing faults and finding fixes for problems, and the focus over the coming year is to place an increasing emphasis on preventive maintenance, monitoring production systems in operation around the world, following up and analysing alerts to ensure that minor issues are fixed before they become real problems.

"Valka is a high-tech company, so our goal is to make full use of the possibilities that technology provides us with to provide the best service we can. Ensuring our customers' efficient operation is very close to our hearts."

Sigríður Olgeirsdóttir

Most customers choose a service contract that entails regular visits to check production systems and diagnose any potential problems, plus a new focus for the coming year is to place a greater emphasis in providing Valka's customers with advice on how to fine-tune production, not least as there is a continuous process of development in the technology available.

"Valka systems are major investments in sophisticated systems and we aim to provide the best available service and advice that helps customers make the most of their investment. It's essential to keep customers happy, and service is a big part of that," Sigríður Olgeirsdóttir said.

JOINING VALKA WITH A WEALTH OF EXPERIENCE

Valka's director of sales **Jón Birgir Gunnarsson** has been at the centre of the growth in recent decades of a group of Icelandic tech companies that have successfully established themselves internationally.

He has an unusually varied career behind him, including hands-on experience of working on fishing vessel refits and maintenance before heading for technical college and from there to Marel. During his time with Marel, he moved from technical drawing to sales advice and project management, before spending three years in the UK, finally heading Marel's seafood equipment division, along the way adding to his skillset with an MBA.

Jón Birgir Gunnarsson

"I have a mixture of practical experience and theoretical knowledge, plus experience of both meat and fish processing sectors around the world, including the spell in the UK which meant working with retail producers. So I've developed a broad over view of food production as a whole," he said.

"I feel that I am at home talking to CEOs and managers, but I've spent a lot of time in factories and I'm just as comfortable in overalls on the factory floor."

From Marel he went to Skaginn 3X, and was involved in large-scale projects that included some major pelagic processing plants, some of them in the Russian Far East.

We caught up with him during a visit to the north of Norway to get a stronger angle on one of Valka's key markets, where the company has seen some of its major successes.

"What's exciting and fun about working for Valka is the energy and the dynamism that this company has, the imagination and the way things get done," he said.

"Valka's focus has been mainly on Iceland and Norway, which are the most demanding markets in the world in terms of hgh-tech processing. Gaining what I see as a leading position in whitefish processing there is a major achievement, and with the steps we are taking in salmon, it's exciting to look forward to the opportunities ahead of us."