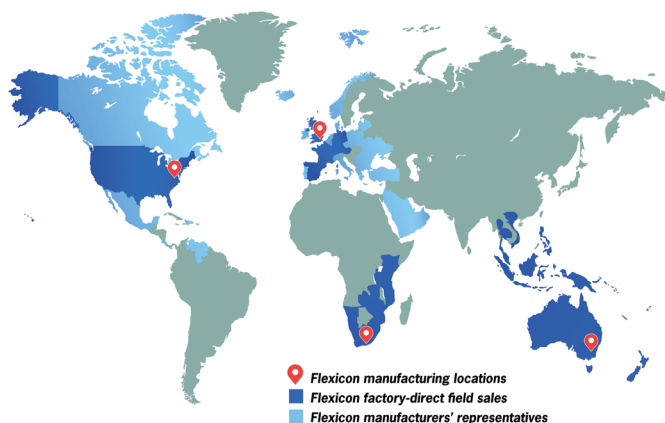




Merlo Coffee Roasters have been sourcing and roasting specialty coffee blends for over thirty years, which they sell to wholesalers and consumers through retail stores and online.

Visible Conveying of Freshly Roasted Beans Creates Unique Customer Experience at Merlo Coffee

MM-0401



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BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA — Dean Merlo, founder and director of Merlo Coffee, inherited his passion for coffee from his father Gino. From his café in Brisbane, Gino Merlo was the first to introduce Australia to the European tradition of espresso as the perfect end to a meal. Dean opened his first Torrefazione (Italian roasting house) in 1996, and soon after began developing and selling his unique coffee blends to other cafés and restaurants. Today, Merlo Coffee operates 17 retail café stores and supplies coffee to over 1,500 eateries throughout Australia. In addition to a roaster at its main store in suburban Brisbane, the company operates a state-of-the-art roasting facility in Eagle Farm, QLD that opened in 2021, allowing the company to triple its roasting capacity.

Merlo had a unique vision for his flagship retail location, where they roast and sell about 21 tonnes (23 tons) of coffee per year. “It’s a bit out of the box, but we wanted to give customers the experience of ordering straight from the roaster,” says Merlo. “We wanted to make a statement that we are roasting and serving fresh, high-quality coffee from the roaster to the counter.”

Starting with a sketch

To pursue his concept, Merlo contacted Flexicon Corporation (Australia) Pty Ltd and outlined his ideas. “I had a vision in my head which I sketched out,” he said. From that drawing, the Flexicon team devised a solution to meet Merlo’s expectation for his retail space. “We’re both from Brisbane,” Merlo adds. “Flexicon is a quality manufacturer, and we’re a quality roaster. It’s a good match.”

The Flexicon FLEXI-DISC® Tubular Cable Conveyor was chosen for Merlo’s project because it can gently convey freshly roasted coffee beans through clear polycarbonate tubing, which creates the desired visual effect. The building’s layout required the conveyor line to be routed from the roaster through walls at the back of the building and then around the ceiling of the café in the front of the building, where orders are fulfilled. The cable and disc design of the system allows the beans to travel smoothly throughout this complex route.

Gentle conveying of fragile beans

The FLEXI-DISC conveyor gently slides the coffee beans through 50 metres of polycarbonate and stainless steel tubing using low-friction polymer discs attached to a stainless steel cable. The discs and cable are driven by a wheel at one end of the circuit and put under tension by a wheel at the other end. This design allows for single or multiple inlets and outlets, and routing of the tubing horizontally, vertically or at any angle.



At its flagship store in Bowen Hills, Queensland, the company roasts 21 tonnes (23 US tons) of coffee each year.



Dean Merlo, founder and owner of Merlo Coffee Roasters.



Dean Merlo worked directly with the team from Flexicon Australia to realise his vision.



At the rear of the building, beans from the roaster are discharged from a bucket elevator into the Tubular Cable Conveyor.

The gentle action of the conveyor minimises breakage of the fragile roasted beans and is completely enclosed to avoid any product contamination. The Merlo system features 100mm (4 inch) diameter tubing routed around the building in an oblong circuit, with four 90° degree bends around the outside corners and two 45° bends. A pair of inline discharge valves are mounted near the ceiling above the café area.

"The TCC was the best way to gently convey the easily damaged, fragile roasted beans while enclosing them for cleanliness and quality control," says Merlo. "It also eased my concerns about noise."

Impressing customers

Now, coffee beans moving through the clear tubing capture the attention of café customers soon as they enter the retail store. This makes a strong statement about Merlo's fresh roasting of their beans on site and prepares them for a unique coffee experience.

When a customer orders a cup of coffee, the operator opens the first pneumatically-actuated discharge valve in the line, allowing the beans to exit the circuit and drop down a rigid polymer tube into the grinder. If the order is for a takeout bag of whole beans, the first valve remains closed, and the beans travel through it to the second valve, which is opened. At this point, the beans slide down another tube into a hopper above the filling station.

"From our side, it was a pretty fair investment, but I was very happy with the way it worked out, and the return's been great," Merlo said. "It wasn't just the manufacture, but the after-sale service," he added. "(Flexicon) walked us through the first service, made sure there were no problems, and (they) were always on hand."

"It shows people that we are serious about quality fresh espresso," Merlo said. "It's a great gimmick, if you like, to get the beans straight to the grinder," which he notes is in the heart of the café. "Now when customers order their fresh espresso beans, they see it coming straight from the roaster, which is awesome."

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The polymer discs and cable are driven by a wheel at one end of the circuit and kept under tension by a wheel at the opposite end.



The Tubular Discharge Valve is opened to dispense the beans into a grinder or closed to allow the beans to travel on to the whole bean packaging station.



Customers can see the beans traveling directly from the roaster to the retail store's front counter.



Customers watch roasted beans gravity discharge from the Tubular Cable Conveyor through clear tubing into a surge hopper.



From the surge hopper, freshly roasted whole beans are packaged for retail sale.



Merlo sells its coffee to more than 1500 eateries, and through 17 retail café stores throughout Australia.