



SECOND HAND: Extrupet's Germiston plant. The company got into the recycling game a decade ago, and recently pioneered the recycling of discarded PET into food-grade plastic packaging for Woolworths.

Haven't I see you before, clear plastic sandwich container?

MOST forward-thinking people embrace the idea of recycling plastic as a huge step towards the greening of our planet, and for some time plastic food containers have been collected, crushed, melted, turned into pellets and then into everything from irrigation pipes to car-boot carpets and the fibre in our pillows and duvets.

But never into containers for food; not in this country. Until now.

Now the containers around Woolworths' range of fresh sandwiches contain plastic that was once rubbish – mostly soft-drink and water bottles collected in the greater Joburg area. The containers are in fact 30 percent recycled polyethylene terephthalate, or rPET for short. The other 70 percent is virgin plastic, which gets a bad environmental rap because it's derived from oil, a non-renewable source of energy, and once used, just clogs landfills. Soon, though, the rPET content will overtake that of the virgin plastic.

PET is king of the plastics, being strong and rigid, as well as inert, and it's what soft-drink and water bottles are made of.

Taking discarded PET and turning it into food-grade recycled PET is a leap forward for the recycling industry, which has grown massively in the past decade but not nearly as fast as our consumption.

In 2000, South Africa produced 50 000 tons of waste PET and recycled just 1 000 tons. Ten years on, 30 000 tons of PET are being recycled annually.

But as a nation we are now producing 140 000 tons of PET waste, which means that more than twice as much of the stuff – 110 000 tons a year – are ending up in

CONSUMER WATCH



BY WENDY KNOWLER
consumer@knowler.co.za

landfills now than a decade ago.

Recycling a ton of PET bottles not only saves 6.2m³ of landfill space, it also saves enough energy to keep a 15-watt energy-saver light glowing for 24 hours.

Clearly more of the stuff needs to come off the dumps into the recycling units, return to the shelves as new packaging, then continue the cycle by being recovered from the trash.

That's exactly what Extrupet has started doing at its Germiston plant. The company got into the recycling game a decade ago, and pioneered the recycling of discarded PET into food-grade PET packaging at the behest of Woolworths. "Not only is packaging made with rPET more ecologically sound and technologically advanced, there is no compromise on food safety," says Zyda Rylands, Woolworths' food managing director.

But anyone who's ever visited a landfill site may not be that thrilled about the idea of what's cradling their sandwich having come from a bunch of mucky bottles.

Apart from the grime, some people store petrol, paraffin and all sorts of other toxic substances in bottles before slinging them out.

But seeing is believing, and Extrupet's R20 million food-grade PET recycling plant goes to mind-boggling lengths to ensure that every microscopic speck of plastic that makes up the rPET destined for food packaging is pristine.

So much so that it's the first recycler in the world to be certified by the British Retail Consortium – Extrupet chief operating officer Chandru Wadhvani had the certificate hung up outside the unit just last week. His plant recycles 1 500 tons –

that's 45 million bottles – a month.

Last week he took a small media group on a tour from the massive bales of scrunched, dirty bottles in the yard outside, through the manual, mechanised and computerised sorting and cleaning stages, on to the grinding and melting stages and finally to the emergence of blue and white flakes – in the case of the non-food-grade rPET – and fine shiny, crystal-like beads in the case of the stuff that will go on to become food-grade rPET, which makes up a third of the company's total production.

If the recyclers had their way, only clear and blue PET bottles would be produced, with easy-to-peel polypropylene labels. PVC labels and lid liners are a no-no, says Wadhvani, because instead of floating to the top of the water tank as polyprop does, they sink to the bottom and mingle with the PET, contaminating it. "Shrink-wrap PVC labels are the biggest nightmare, because stripping them off is very labour intensive."

Red, green and brown bottles are problematic for recycling plants, and thus fetch less money for the many thousands of people who earn a living collecting old bottles.

"We are talking to the manufacturers, trying to get them to help us by putting their products in bottles compatible with recycling, but it's an uphill battle," Wadhvani said.

For the first time, a SA company is recycling plastic that can be used to package food items