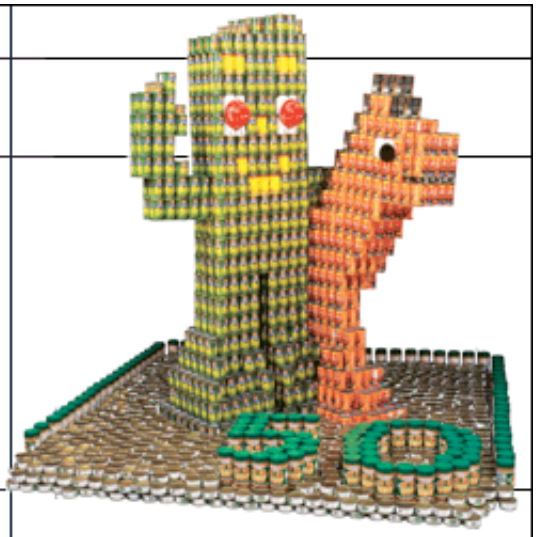
A friendly competition with a can-do spirit.

The Architects of Food

by Dean Blaine

Photography by Marina Dodis



Award Winner for Structural Ingenuity: 50 Years of GUM-BEAN and PORK-EY

GEOFF KEHRIG NEEDS HEINZ kidney beans, and he needs them fast. Canstruction 2005, held in Vancouver, Canada, kicks off in precisely 50 minutes and he is staring at a pallet of Smart Choice kidney beans. This won't work. "We've got eleven cases of the wrong cans," he blurts into a cell phone, his voice shaky. "It's not like it's eleven cans," he says, "it's eleven cases."

Five minutes ago, Kehrig thought he was prepared for anything. As team captain and chief designer for the West Coast Signals, he spent weeks planning for today's event. He phoned other teams and asked for pointers, he learned a new computer design program, and he logged hours at the supermarket, stacking and measuring cans, comparing labels, and making stock clerks very suspicious.

The rules of Canstruction are fairly straightforward. Create a structure by stacking cans or packages of nonperishable foods. Do it within 14 hours. Make nothing larger than 10 feet wide by 10 feet long by 8 feet tall. The structure must be self-supporting (Velcro, tape, rubber bands, and string are permissible; glue and other permanent adhesives are not). Foam core, cardboard, Plexiglas, and plywood are admissible as leveling devices, but they can't be any thicker than a quarter-inch. And all labels must

remain intact.

It's the last rule that's causing Kehrig problems. He specifically selected the cans of Heinz kidney beans because the labels are brown. Kehrig and his team are constructing a veggie burger. Light-orange cans of beans in maple-syrup sauce form the bun, red cans of tomato sauce are the tomato, green cans of green beans will be lettuce, and the Heinz kidney beans were meant to be the veggie-burger patty. But the Smart Choice kidney-bean cans are beige, too light a hue. Everybody knows that hamburgers aren't beige. Because the rules forbid altering the labels in any way, these cans won't work.

"They didn't have enough in stock," Kehrig says, running for the door, cell phone in hand. "I've got some scrambling to do."

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Canstruction is an annual charity event sponsored by the Society of Design Administration (SDA), an affiliate organization of the American Institute of Architects. In various cities throughout North America, teams including engineers, designers, and architects gather once a year to plan and build large, elaborate structures by stacking cans and packages of non-perishable foods. The creations remain on display for a number of days before being "de-canstructed" with all foods donated to local food banks. The structures are judged in categories including Best Meal, Best Use of Labels, and Structural Ingenuity. Competition is heated but friendly. Local winners go on to compete at the international level at the annual SDA convention in Las Vegas.

The New York City chapter of SDA hatched the first Canstruction event in 1993. There were 13 entries that first year. The event has grown, and now more than 50 cities in North America hold an annual Canstruction competition. The event has become so popular that SDA has received queries from as far away as Israel and Australia. "It's a win-win event," says Cheri Melillo, national executive director for Canstruction. "The medium is the message. Every can of food in every structure is going to help a family in need." Melillo estimates that nearly 400 structures are assembled each year and that more than 1 million pounds of food go to charity.

The Cruise Ship Terminal in Canada Place is host to Canstruction 2005 for the North American competition, and the convention space resembles something out of Willie Wonka's chocolate factory. Various foods in colorful packaging are stacked high on pallets around the room. Light-pink boxes of Cott Soda Mousse stand in one corner. Electric-blue and bright-red boxes of Kool Aid Pouches stand in another. Colorful cans of food include large blue cans of Hunt's Riviera Style pasta sauce, vibrant yellow and black cans of Yves Veggie Cuisine Organic Black Beans, and aqua-blue and white cans of Swanson Chicken Broth. The Vancouver event has a reputation for using more cans per structure than any other venue, and it's obvious why. The varieties of tuna cans alone are endless: chunk-light tuna in water, flaked-light tuna in water, chunk tuna packed in oil, flaked tuna in oil, and more.

THE TICKET

Want to learn more about the Canstruction competition? Visit canstruction.org on the Web.

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"Canstruction works because it has a very different tone from the usual food bank appeal," says Margot Paris, chairperson for Vancouver's Canstruction 2005. "It's fun, whimsical, and creative. We are playing with our food."

Margot Paris starts the countdown to Canstruction 2005, with “three...two...one,” then rings a dinner bell to signal the official start. Team members rush to their places and commence stacking.

There are 17 teams competing in this year’s event, and the structure ideas are nearly as colorful as the cans themselves: a sea serpent, a Rubik’s Cube, a Pacman character, a Lava Lamp, and a jukebox.

“You start from the base and work your way up,” says Brock Lumsden, architect and team captain for We CAN Reach the Sky! Lumsden and his team are constructing an eight-foot-tall windup toy from foods including orange cans of SunRype mandarin oranges, blue bottles of Naya spring water, and red bottles of Hunt’s ketchup. “It’s always the base that screws up first,” he says. “If you’re off by just a hair then you wind up with discrepancies.” They had to rebuild the base of last year’s award-winning apple several times, Lumsden says.

Stacking cans into a recognizable form is not nearly as easy as it sounds. Teams plan for weeks to get their structures right. It begins with a brainstorming session, then moves to a sketch. Next, teams select the cans based on size, color, and concept. This involves stacking, measuring, and rearranging numerous types of cans. Some teams photograph cans with digital cameras. Then the team architect or designer builds one can in a 3-D design program. That image is duplicated and a 3-D digital version of the structure is created using the cans as building blocks. Architects and engineers analyze the structure using math and basic physics.

“Then you tackle it head on,” says Adrian Bois, captain for team CANspired. “You dive in and don’t look back.” Bois and his team are building a three-foot-tall Snoopy on a four-foot-tall doghouse from cans of tuna, green packages of Kool Aid, and blue boxes of macaroni and cheese. “When you start to build, you always find something different from what you were expecting,” says team member Ben Garfinkel. He and his teammates are stacking cans of tuna and tomato juice to make the doghouse. During the planning stages, five cans of tuna were the same height as one can of tomato juice. But now that they’re actually stacking the cans, they have discovered that 15 cans of tuna is not the same height as 3 cans of tomato juice. They have to compensate for the difference with layers of cardboard. Losing even a millimeter when stacking can make a difference, Garfinkel says. “Everything you do when you’re stacking cans has to be absolutely perfect.”

At more than 12,000 cans, CANspired’s Snoopy structure contains more food than any other. Snoopy alone can feed nearly 10,000 people for one week, says Arlene Kravitz, director of communications for the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society. “Canstruction is like winning the lottery for us,” Kravitz says.

For the next 14 hours, the teams struggle to complete their structures. Team Richmond is building the animated characters Gumby and Pokey from cans of green beans and pork and beans. “We are structurally engineering as we go,” says Nicki Roberts, captain for Team Richmond. “Flying by the seat of our pants,” she says. They decide to pull out one layer of cans on Pokey’s snout, and they pull out a row of cans from the bottom because the structure is too high.

The occasional collapse is signaled by the crashing of cans and a sigh that rises above the din of the room. The all-Greek team representing the Hellenic Community of Vancouver is trying to prevent its structure from suffering such a fate. They are building a structurally challenging Spartan helmet from 7,000 gold-colored cans of tuna. Nikos Kallas stands on a ladder, applying the final cans to the top of

the helmet. He leans precariously over the structure, suspended by two team members grabbing his belt. “I smell a Greek tragedy coming on,” jokes an onlooker. Team members hold their breath as Kallas successfully stacks the final can, then cheer wildly for the finished product. “No Greek tragedy this year, buddy,” captain Rolandos Chrysomilides shouts.

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When the awards are finally handed out, Gum-bean and Pork-ey take the prize for Structural Ingenuity, We CAN Reach the Sky’s windup toy wins for Best Meal, and CANspired’s “More Than Just Peanuts,” featuring Snoopy and his doghouse, wins the coveted Juror’s Favorite. Of all the structures submitted to the international finals from Vancouver, only Snoopy brings home a mention—for Most Cans.

“We got off to a rather slow start,” Geoff Kehrig tells the audience as he accepts the Best Rookie award for the West Coast Signals’ veggie burger. He tells them how he spent nearly four hours scouring Vancouver for Heinz kidney beans. “Just get it done,” he recalls, “just get it done.” Seven stores and $200 later he managed to find 145 of the 240 cans he needed. The West Coast Signals improvised, however, by using the off-color cans at the back of the structure. “It’s a bit bun-heavy,” Kehrig says, because they had to cut a layer from the burger patty, but they managed to pull it off. Next year, he says, they’ll add some mustard. ★

DEAN BLAINE writes frequently for Attaché.

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