



Managing Director René Bunschuch demonstrates the trowalization process. In this final step, the knives are polished to a high gloss.
Photos: Stefan Specht

Knives XXL

The most important pillars of Brandenburg's economy are small and medium-sized enterprises. Some of these companies impress with innovations and specializations. They serve niches, are owner-managed and are not listed on the stock exchange - the so-called hidden champions. In our series, we present Brandenburg companies to which this applies. Today: BE Maschinenmesser GmbH & Co. KG, Spreenhagen

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René Bunschuch, Managing Director

The company BE Maschinenmesser GmbH & Co KG in Spreenhagen manufactures slicing and cutter knives for the food industry. A lot is changing in the company right now. Managing Director René Bunschuch: “Over many years, the machines have always evolved, but not the knives. Today, together with the machine manufacturers, we are considering how to improve the knives.” A major topic here is the increasingly higher production speeds in the food industry.

The company is also taking an important step towards automation. However, some essential operations, such as straightening of the steel will remain

manual. This work requires a sense of proportion, strength, and stamina, as well as a great deal of routine. A knife can weigh up to 35 kilograms. Depending on the requirements, the knife steel contains copper, nickel, iron, and chromium in varying proportions. “But this is not rocket science” explains Bunschuch. “The crucial ingredient is the know-how of the employees.”

Patrick Stolt is head of the hand sharpening department. He trained at BE and has been with the company for 20 years. His colleague Maik Paslack has been with the company since 2008. On the knee of his work trousers is a patch made of rough

leather. With it, he presses the steel against the grindstone and guides it by hand. He demonstrates the result first on a cardboard, then on his hairy forearm. The hair is gone, and the operation went without a drop of blood.

Where the machines and automation can replace humans is, for example, in surface grinding and trowalizing departments. This is the surface treatment by plastic abrasive bodies in a drum. Extreme surface smoothing is a hygiene requirement for knives in the food industry.

BE produces over 4,000 knives a month, and the unit price can be well into four figures. "Of course, these knives are also resharpened. That is possible up to six times. This can be done directly at BE in Spreenhagen, in the grinding stores in the group or by other service providers," says Stolt.

The founding story

BE Maschinenmesser GmbH & Co KG celebrates its 30th anniversary this summer. Three founders, who had previously worked for a knife manufacturer in Berlin-Köpenick, opened their own company in Spreenhagen at that time. Since 2012, the company has had an American owner, PRIMEEdge Inc, with whom the Spreenhageners feel they are in good hands. It is a family business with an extraordinary history.

The Cozzini family

Company founder Guiseppe Cozzini came from the small northern Italian town of Pinzolo. After completing his apprenticeship as a knife grinder, he set off for America. Like many other young men, he wanted to earn money to provide a better life for his family. In 1905, he began to realize his dream in Chicago.

He traveled only every two years to visit his family in Italy. In 1930 he brought his three sons Ottorino, Lino and Angelo to work with him in the business. Now they already had a mobile sharpening shop on a horse-drawn wagon and were providing knives and their service to restaurants and meat factories throughout Chicago. Soon trucks were used, and the tours grew larger.

The next generation, Ivo, Oscar, and Oswald Cozzini expanded the business into a nationwide cutlery service with numerous knife-related products and services. An industrial knife sharpening shop with field service was established. It took over knife sharpening for restaurants, supermarkets, and industrial customers.

Ivo Cozzini is 72 years old and today the CEO. His son Alexander is President of the group of companies. Worldwide, 250

employees work for the group of companies, which has branches in six countries. Spreenhagen is the largest production site for industrial knives in Europe with around 75 employees. The group also includes a knife manufacturer in France and sharpening service in the USA. There are sales offices in Spain and Denmark

as well as a sharpening facility in Malmö, Sweden. There are seven locations in total.

The Managing Director

René Bunschuch is now the managing director of BE Maschinenmesser GmbH & Co KG, alongside Alexander Cozzini. He studied economics with a major in controlling at the University of Applied Sciences in Berlin and has relevant professional experience. In 2018, he applied for a position as controller at BE Maschinenmesser, and two years later he became managing director, together with Alexander Cozzini. René Bunschuch still lives in Berlin-Köpenick, which has the advantage that he goes against the flow in rush-hour traffic. Nevertheless, he wants to move and thus shorten his commute. Most employees have short commutes; they come from Spreenhagen or the surrounding area.

After 30 years at the site, BE Maschinenmesser has close ties with the local community. The company supports the horse-riding club and also the choir in Fürstenwalde. René Bunschuch keeps in touch with the district administration and talks to the district director about the development of the site. He also deals with questions that employees bring to him. For example, the current concern to make the way to school safer for the children with a traffic light.



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Patrick Stolt, Head of Manual Sharpening Department



Patrick Stolt while grinding a knife. The know-how of the employees is crucial for the quality.



Maik Paslack shows that the freshly sharpened knife glides through the cardboard as if by itself.



René Lube-Müller is one of the company's customs administrators. With the additional training, the employees can prepare all export documents themselves.



Astrid Gajewsky-Seraphin is the human resources manager. BE Maschinenmesser employs many entry-level workers, because there is no training for the profession of knifemaker in the region.

Aleksandra Zemliankina started with a student job in the company. Today she is responsible for marketing and can use her foreign language skills.

Automation and robots

The purchase of BE Maschinenmesser by the Cozzini family in 2012 was linked to the goal of developing Spreenhagen into the most modern production plant in the group in the near future.

With the use of automatic machines and a robot, “operator-free shifts” will be possible. The automatic grinding machines will then also work on weekends and around the clock. A single employee visits the trowalizing line every three to four hours. He checks the automatic machines, provides blanks, and removes finished industrial knives. An alarm system backs up the lone worker on duty.

The production hall will be expanded and equipped with solar power. It will completely cover the electricity demand from May to October. A modern air extraction system will improve working conditions. Automation will enable multi-machine operation and bring benefits to customers. BE will be able to respond faster to orders and reduce delivery times. René Bunschuch says, “We’ve done our homework in production and also improved our external image.” This is a process that is already paying off. The company is seeing a steady increase in incoming orders.



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René Lube-Müller, Sales Representative

Export to 70 countries

BE Maschinenmesser was successful in the niche market from the very beginning. As early as 1997, the Federal Minister of Economics awarded the company an export prize, which was designed as an encouragement for East German companies. BE Maschinenmesser employed only 15 people at the time but was already supplying industrial knives to 20 countries. Today, the company has clientele in about 70 countries worldwide and 75 employees. The customers are machine manufacturers, distributors and butchering and processing plants. Half of all products are exported.

To ensure that the knives make it across the borders in good condition, sales employees Sebastian Boldt and René Lube-Müller are trained as customs officers. René Lube-Müller has been with the company since 2019. The trained office administrator says: “The additional training took half a year and

the training in the company. The advantage for BE is that we can handle all customs formalities ourselves.” In his main job as a sales representative, René Lube-Müller primarily looks after customers in China, while Sebastian Boldt is responsible for the South American business.

Career start with student job

Aleksandra Zemliankina is responsible for marketing. The Russian studied the subject in Berlin and came to the company by chance. In 2018, she attended a German course at night school and met Alexander Cozzini’s girlfriend at the time and now his wife. This is how the student became aware of BE Maschinenmesser. She started with a part-time job and stayed with it after graduation. She enjoys working in an international company where she can use her language skills. She reveals that she speaks English better than German and that she wants to become a German citizen. She still has some fear of the language proficiency test, which is mandatory for naturalization. But she is learning fast and has now started a third foreign language - Spanish.

Generation change

With annual salary increases of five to ten percent, BE Maschinenmesser is now also an attractive employer financially. René



David Nickel straightening a machine knife, using the dial indicator to check that the tolerance of 0.2 millimeters is maintained.



Tobias Stuschka is responsible for quality management. He wants to involve the employees when automated machines change the work processes.



Miroslav Nedelcher straightening the knife blank. Foreign employees like him have been integrated into the teams for many years.

Bunschuch explains: “We started low and are now in the middle to higher range. We’ve even had two employees join us from Tesla, which probably has to do with the more family-friendly working hours.”

As office manager, Astrid Gajewsky-Seraphin is also responsible for personnel. She says, “We are well-known in the area and don’t have a shortage of skilled workers right now. The family-like working atmosphere contributes to the fact that most employees stay with the company for many years.” However, because generation change is also on the horizon at BE, the HR manager has drawn up a list of employees who will reach retirement age in the next few years and whose qualifications will then need to be filled. BE trains office and industrial staff as well as metal technology specialists and industrial mechanics itself.

Qualification in the workplace

Tobias Stuschka has been with the company since 2022; he came from the insolvent steel construction company Reuther STC in Fürstenwalde. The employment agency had reacted quickly to the company’s shutdown and invited employees to a job fair. Stuschka is a trained welder and industrial foreman. At his old employer, he was a department manager; at BE, he worked his way up as a quality management representative and is now responsible for the quality and

environmental management, among other things. Tobias Stuschka says: “The potential of the company convinced me to start here. We are now in the process of standardizing the processes. We are automating and changing the processes. We want to eliminate sources of error and need to bring all employees along with us in the changes.” The employment agency sponsored Tobias Stuschka’s training. During this



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Astrid Gajewsky-Seraphin, Office Manager

time, he went through all departments in a cross-training program.

The production workers must learn from their colleagues how to make knives. For example, it takes two to three years of practice before someone masters how to straighten a knife. David Nickel has been doing it for seven years. He uses the dial indicator to check whether the knife is flat.

Working atmosphere as a success factor

For Astrid Gajewsky-Seraphin, further training of department managers in work organization, personnel management and law is also a key task. BE Maschinenmesser does a lot to ensure that employees enjoy coming to work and project a positive image to the outside world. This includes flextime for administrative staff and the option of continuing to work in a home office from time to time. German lessons are offered to foreign employees during working hours. The company also organizes an English course that takes place every 14 days and is available to all employees. About ten employees are from Poland, and supervisors take this into account when scheduling duties, so carpooling is possible. There is a free vending machine for drinks, a meal allowance, and fresh fruit and vegetables to grab twice a week. Since 2018, a works council has represented the employees and usually finds “open ears” of the management. This is how arrangements such as a leasing offer for bicycles and e-bikes for private use came about. Since the bus only runs three times a day to Spreehagen, this is an environmentally friendly alternative to owning a car.

FORUM / Bolko Bouché

KONTAKT
 Jens Jankowsky, Referent Energie und Innovation,
 Tel. 0335 5621-1332,
 E-Mail: jankowsky@ihk-ostbrandenburg.de