

'Pre-Cooked' Fills a Growing Need

More consumers are demanding great-tasting meals that take just minutes to prepare. *By Bryan Salvage*

(Photo courtesy of Mintel International)

Work out at the gym for 45 minutes before lunch. Jump on-line before dinner to finish a report that's due early the next morning. It's a fast-paced life that requires increasingly faster meal solutions.

"Right now, the convenience trend is dictating a lot of new pre-cooked/ready-to-eat [entrée and dinner] varieties," says Chanda Rowan, U.S. Public Relations Manager, Mintel International, Chicago, Ill. "It has continued to dominate supermarket trends, specifically because manufacturers are now continuing to create dishes that cut cooking time."

Mintel reports that U.S. new product pre-cooked and fully cooked launches in the processed fish, meat, and egg products category totaled 195 in 2006, up from 188 in 2005, 155 in 2004, and 171 in 2003. Recent new product introductions containing pre-cooked meat and poultry range from Hamburger Helper Microwave Singles Cheeseburger Mac to Archer Farms Cornish Hen Stuffed with Apples and Cherries to Boneless Wings Inc.'s Sweet Bourbon Chicken Medallions.

Pre-cooked meals have come a long way since TV dinners debuted more than 50 years ago. But the most recent evolution on the beef side began not too long ago.

"We first started looking at the pre-cooked beef category in the late 1990s [retail heat-n-eat entrées], and we have been very pleased to see continued growth in this category," says Randy Irion, director of retail marketing for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, which contracts to manage retail programs for the beef checkoff.

Recent AC Nielsen data show that the search for quick-and-easy meals

often ends in the convenience section of the meat case, Irion says. Dollar sales of refrigerated entrées grew tremendously in 2005 to \$1.6 billion, increasing more than 10.7 percent versus a year earlier, compared to the 1.25 percent growth of total meat dollar sales during the same period.

"Pre-cooked beef has been a great addition to the fresh beef case, and beef has captured a significant share of the whole meat case," he adds. "When manufacturers are introducing these items, many times these pre-cooked beef products are part of a broader product line that includes other proteins. Consumers' preference for beef has proven itself in the heat-and-serve category and suppliers have responded to this and benefited. Best-selling pre-cooked beef products include pot roasts, beef tips, and shredded beef."

Talkin' Turkey

Products such as pre-cooked turkey meatballs are a real timesaver for a busy weeknight dinner, says Sherrie Rosenblatt, vice president of marketing and communications, National Turkey Federation (NTF). "With so many parents stretched for time, this product is just one example of being able to prepare dinner in a quick 20- to 30-minute timeframe," she adds. "Popular Food Network shows such as 'Rachel Ray's 30-Minute Meals,' 'Sandra Lee's Semi-Homemade Cooking' series, and 'Good Food Fast with Family Circle,' reflect the trend toward spending less time in the kitchen and using convenience products."

As consumers become more time-stressed, they rely more on pre-cooked products in general, says Karen Boillot, director of retail marketing for The Na-

tional Pork Board (NPB). "They're looking for variety and to expand their horizons," she says.

The National Pork Board reports that for the 52 weeks ending June 2006 within the value-added category, the breakdown on dollar share of value-added sales for all proteins is as follows: ready-to-heat (pre-cooked meat items excluding dinner entrées), four percent; specialty cuts, meat that has been specially cut such as stir fry, kabobs, or stew meat), 23 percent; dinner entrées, 34 percent; and ready-to-cook (raw meat that has been seasoned/marinated or stuffed), 39 percent, which represents the largest share.

When asked how pre-cooked pork entrées are faring in the marketplace, Boillot answers: "Even though the pork industry has seen growth in value-added products, the entire [value-added category in meat] has continued to grow. So the share of value added as far as dollars spent within the meat department has been fairly steady - approximately seven percent. That's good news. Pork is holding its own in the face of strong competition from other proteins in the meat case."

"If you look at 2006, in fresh pork dinner entrées, we have a 9.7 percent

point change over that time period so they have gained in strength year over year," she adds.

Some industry insiders feel the ultimate in case-ready products would be in pre-cooked form. Can we expect to see mostly pre-cooked case-ready products in the future? "Our consumer is not homogeneous, and not by any stretch of the imagination looking for either all pre-cooked or all raw protein products," Boillot answers.

There will continue to be a need for variety in the marketplace, agrees NTF's Rosenblatt. "There will be many who prefer the convenience of pre-cooked products, but still others who prefer buying a turkey tenderloin, ground turkey, or turkey breast to create their own flavor profile for breakfast, lunch, or dinner."

As long as convenience is a factor in consumers' meal decisions, there will be continued opportunity for growth in pre-cooked products, Irion predicts. However, there is still a tremendous appeal and flexibility in fresh, raw beef.

"When you buy cuts from the round or the chuck, you can prepare them in many different ways," Irion continues. "But if you buy a beef stroganoff, it's pretty much a finished product. And we can't ignore costs. It's far more economical, particularly for larger families, to prepare beef dishes from scratch at home. Convenience will continue to make pre-cooked a growing portion of the overall beef product mix, but I don't ever foresee it overshadowing fresh, raw beef."

Greatest Processing Challenge

The greatest challenge facing pre-cooked products for processors is retaining that "fresh-cooked" flavor as much as possible, says Joseph

Sebranek, university professor, director of graduate education, Animal Science, Food Science and Human Nutrition, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. "Cooked products right out of the oven or smokehouse are like freshly-baked bread in terms of a unique, superior flavor, a large share of which is lost after cooling," he says. "If that could be captured, it would be a tremendous advantage. We have not yet been able to do that so the best we can do is prevent flavor deterioration following chilling, or provide flavor supplements that are retained for flavor contributions.

"For example, using antioxidants,

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particularly naturals [rosemary or spices] is effective, using flavoring agents [spices, flavor enhancers, liquid smoke, batter/breading, etc.] to intensify positive flavors, and using packaging to prevent the oxidative deterioration of flavor will all contribute to a better product," Sebranek says. "It's critical to provide some flavor intensifiers or masking agents to be successful. For example, for products where we don't add these things, such as ground-beef patties or ribeye steaks, there is very little pre-cooking done. The challenge comes from the fact that cooking makes a meat product highly susceptible to oxidative flavor changes because natural reductants are destroyed and chemical catalysts are released by heat."

Packaging is also a challenge in heat-and-eat products because most will be microwaved to reheat, Sebranek adds. "A package that works well in the microwave is critical," he says. "Processors also need to consider that microwave heating is considerably different from conventional heating in terms of heated product properties, and the product needs to be formulated specifically to perform at its best in the microwave. One reason batter and breading is so popular is that this approach solves many of the problems of appearance and flavor that result from pre-cooking." **MP**

Refrigerated Dinners/Entrées

Latest 52 weeks ending Dec. 31, 2006

Total U.S.—F/DMX (Supermarkets, Drugstores, and Mass Merchandiser Outlets...excluding Wal-Mart)

Total sales: \$770,466,200, up 4.6 percent from the same year-earlier period

Brands	Dollar Sales	Dollar Sales % Chg Y Ago
Total Sales	\$770,466,200	4.6
1. Private Label	\$131,091,600	2.6
2. Hormel	106,432,800	5.3
3. Tyson	100,555,500	3.4
4. Lloyd's	86,911,430	1.9
5. Louis Rich	58,462,100	-8.0
6. Perdue Short Cuts	49,874,740	-5.1
7. Perdue	30,117,620	338.1
8. Perdue Done It	18,019,800	-50.6
9. Foster Farms	14,240,880	16.3
10. Old El Paso	13,062,570	-9.9

SOURCE: IRI