

THE RISE OF THE RETORT PACKAGE

Retort pouches, trays and cartons are bringing new convenience to consumers and exciting new looks to the shelf, but the venerable can is fighting back. BY HUSTON KEITH

The Japanese, with their tight living quarters, have long understood the space-saving and convenience properties of retort pouches and trays. Europeans, facing similar constraints, have also paid the premium for the merits of the pouch.

Now Americans, in fits and starts, are increasingly finding the benefits of retort packages are worth a few pennies more—first with lunch bowls and pet food trays and now with tuna. Pre-cooked chicken and rice are starting to appear in pouches, and even pre-cooked vegetables in clear trays may soon appear on supermarket shelves.

Better taste, added convenience

What U.S. consumers are discovering is something that our soldiers have long known—food in a retort pouch or tray tastes better than the same product in a can. The secret is simple, said Dr. Magdy Hefnawy, president of Ag-Tech International in Greeneville, Tenn., during a recent thermal processing course for The Packaging Group. The flat profile of the package allows faster heat penetration to the center, allowing the product much shorter cooking times. The result, she said,



Food in pouches is often easier for consumers to prepare. Zatarain's rice takes a minute or two in the microwave and adds a gourmet touch to any meal without messy pots and pans.

is less overcooking near the outside of the container and much better moisture retention.

Food in retort packaging is also often easier to prepare. New pouches of Zatarain's and Uncle Ben's rice just need a minute or two in the microwave, without messy pots and pans.

Ironically, the new rice packages replace not metal cans but less expensive non-retortable cartons or film wraps.

Consumers also like the usability of such packaging. They no

longer have to scrounge around a drawer for a can opener. And, unlike cans, there are no sharp edges on a retort pouch to cut fingers. Suppliers like Zip-Pak and Alcoa even offer

retortable zippers so consumers can reseal packages and make better use of larger portions.

To market

Retortable pouches, trays and cartons have both the advantage and disadvantage of being unique packages. They stand out from their counterparts on the shelf, but they still lack the trusted familiarity of traditional cans and jars.

Pouches benefit from a much larger surface area than cans on which to print high-quality billboard graphics to capture the consumer's attention. It was a great benefit when Star-Kist tuna made the switch to retort pouches, a change that was rapidly imitated by the rest of the market.

Trays and pouches also can be made with clear films to entice consumers with the product inside.

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Pouches offer a larger surface to print high quality billboard graphics to capture the consumer's attention, as evidenced by these brands of tuna, traditionally packaged in a can and now offered in a retort pouch.

RETORT POUCH AND TRAY 2005

RETORT POUCH AND TRAY 2005, "Getting Into the Retort Pouch and Tray Business", will cover every facet of this fast-growing packaging form—from consumer convenience and new materials to state-of-the-art equipment and essential quality control techniques. Topics and speakers include:

- The food packager experience – an end-user panel with representatives from Tyson, Smithfield and others
- Market overview and projections – Keymark Associates
- Consumer reaction to retort pouches – Mona Doyle
- New non-foil materials for microwavability – Kureha & Celplast
- New tray and lidding materials – RJR & Sonoco
- Pre-made pouches – Elag (Switzerland)
- Convenient opening and closure systems – Zip-Pak
- New applications from Europe – Huhtamaki

There will also be separate half-day pre-conference courses on the basics of retort packaging materials and processes. The conference will be held April 13-14 at the Radisson Inn, Princeton, New Jersey. Courses will be held at the same location April 12. For more information, visit www.packaginggroup.com.



Recently adopted by Hormel and Stagg's chilis, Tetra Recart's retortable carton offers both larger graphic display space and stackability.

cans and two-thirds of those in Europe. Recloseable cans such as Silgan's Dot Top are also now appearing in the United States, after a decade of success in Latin America. Unique shapes have debuted and microwavable cans are said to

be on the horizon.

Regardless, retort pouches, trays and cartons have now gained a foothold in the U.S. market. The significant consumer and marketing benefits, combined with continued efforts at cost reduction, will likely contribute to continued and rapid growth for these truly innovative package types. **BP**

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Currently, most clear packages use films with glass-like silicon dioxide or aluminum oxide coatings vulnerable to "pinholes" when they flex. But Tokyo's Kureha Chemical has introduced Besela® film coated with polyacrylic acid for outstanding barrier properties, preventing pinholes even after considerable flexing.

Retortable packages also provide excellent display opportunities near checkout counters and in convenience stores because they can be hung from a pegboard. But since the displays in most retail formats are typically shelves, the pouches and trays sometimes end up lying flat, essentially invisible to hurried shoppers.

Tetra Recart's retortable carton, recently adopted by Hormel for its Hormel and Stagg brands of chili, offers both larger graphic display space and stackability. It allows one-third more packages (compared to cans) to be displayed, according to Steve Hellenschmidt, general manager with Tetra Pak.

Despite these advantages, there is the risk that people won't buy chili in what they perceive to be a "juice box". Tetra and Hormel are taking no chances,

Hellenschmidt says, and are working closely together to educate consumers on the benefits of the package.

Overcoming the cost hurdle

While their many advantages have given pouches, trays and cartons a surge in growth in the past few years, the higher costs associated with such packaging have kept them under 10 percent of the 30+ billion metal food can market.

And while materials often carry a premium, the equipment required to fill retort pouches present larger obstacles. Pouch and tray filling and sealing equipment often run at much slower speeds than can lines. And they either require the modification of existing equipment at a substantial cost or an initial capital investment that can reach into the millions. But, equipment and materials makers are working hard to provide higher speeds to food processors.

Can-makers have watched these competing retortable packages encroach on their territory for years, but after watching sales stagnate for decades, they seem to be fighting back. Easy-open lids are growing in popularity and are already used by one-third of U.S. food

Where to go for more information...

◆ **Zippers for retort packaging.**

At Minigrip, contact Bob Hogan at 815.488.6973 or visit www.zippak.com.

◆ **Zippers for retort packaging.**

At Presto Products, contact Tom Winter at 800.265.0750 or visit www.fresh-lock.com.

◆ **Retort pouches.** At Kapak, call 952.541.0730 or e-mail info@kapak.com.

◆ **Clear films for retort packaging.**

At Kureha Chemical Industry Co., call 03.3249.4643 or visit www.kureha.co.jp.

◆ **Retortable cartons.** At Tetra Pak, contact Stephen Hellenschmidt at 940.367.3000 or visit www.tetrapak.com.

◆ **Recloseable can technology.** At Silgan Containers Corp., contact Jeff DeLiberty at 818.710.3742 or visit www.silgan.com