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## SPECIAL REPORT

### Wrapping Up Hot Deli Foods

by Bryan Salvage,  
Senior Editor

Shoppers need packaging that is convenient, easy to handle and carry home, provides reheat options, and protects the temperature freshness and palatability of the product.

When it comes to take-out packaging for hot deli foods, processors and meat and deli retailers have many options to choose from including cups, plates, and trays with lids or domes; resealable bags; cartons; and other containers designed to keep food hot and prevent leaking and spills.

"We utilize packaging that is visually attractive, user-friendly, environmentally responsible, and cost-efficient," says Brian Frey, marketing assistant corporate communications, for Pittsburgh, PA-based Giant Eagle Inc.

Giant Eagle's hot deli-food packaging exhibits the following qualities, he adds:

- Microwaveable
- Stackable
- Leak-resistant — holds food, sauces, gravies, etc. properly
- Retains heat and vents steam efficiently
- Cut-resistant
- Heat lamp-resistant
- Recyclable/biodegradable
- One-piece design requiring no assembly that eliminates container and lid inventory issues

"Typical packaging [for hot deli foods] has included a foam clam-shell package, which is fairly inexpensive and it does a good job of holding in the heat for a product someone plans to eat right away," says Huston Keith, packaging expert and principal for Marietta, GA-based Keymark Associates. "Or if a store wants a nicer presentation, they might use a solid, black plastic tray with either a clear clam-shell lid or a black tray or plate with a dome lid on it."

In order to be successful in today's hot deli-foods market, however, this packaging must meet many diverse needs, as indicated by Giant Eagle's hot deli-food requirements.

"One-step packaging is key in being able to package, chill or freeze, or heat and serve from the same container," points out Larinda Becker, vice president, business development, Reynolds Food Packaging, Lincolnshire, IL. "We see packaging evolving to more consumer features for leak resistance, freshness, food-safety attributes, and most importantly — table-ready. They just open and dine!"

What this all points to is more convenience for consumers.

"Packaging opportunities for cooked foods are growing because of the demand for more convenience from time-stressed consumers," says Chip Cook, director of trays/absorbents, Cryovac/Sealed Air Corp., Duncan, SC. "Cryovac does not provide packaging such as trays with lids for hot foods at this time. We have focused specifically on our absorbent line."

The company's Dri-Loc™ product line is a leading brand of absorbent products that many consumers will find beneath the meat in trays they take home from supermarkets.

"We see a trend with consumers moving towards cooked products," Cook says. "We asked ourselves what could we do to help fill their growing demand. We saw a need in rotisserie chicken, especially where a significant amount of hot grease pools up in the bottom of rotisserie chicken packages. We worked hard to develop an absorbent product that would meet the needs of that demanding application."

In May 2004, Cryovac introduced its new Hot-Loc™ pad for in-store deli rotisserie chicken. Developed in response to retailer requests, the pad absorbs the hot grease and fat that can collect in the bottom of rotisserie chicken packages.

"The National Chicken Council [NCC] estimates that five-hundred million rotisserie chickens will be sold in U.S. supermarkets in 2004. That's a lot of chicken!" Cook says. "And the September 24th edition of *USA Today* had an article about Costco Wholesale that mentions that Costco sells twenty-two million rotisserie chickens a year. We see significant opportunity for our Hot-Loc™ absorbent product just for rotisserie chicken."

Since rotisserie chickens produce grease when cooked, spills often occur when the chicken is carried away from the display cases and to the check-out counters, Cook continues. The Cryovac Hot-Loc™ pad reduces spills by absorbing hot grease and other juices before they can leak from packages. This helps retailers address consumer concerns associated with burns, damaged automobile upholstery, and slip-and-fall accidents.

Here's what this product is made of and how it works. Designed with the same absorbent core as the Cryovac Dri-Loc® pad, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) compliant Hot-Loc™ pad has an outer skin layer specifically developed to



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withstand temperatures up to 180° F for several hours under deli heating lamps. The pad's tray-side features hundreds of tiny one-way valves that absorb juices only through the bottom of the pad, keeping the meat from drying. Consumers choosing to re-heat their purchases at home will find this pad is also microwave safe, Cook points out.

This pad can be used with existing rigid plastic tray-and-top containers that retailers use to package rotisserie chicken, and it can also be used for other pre-cooked hot deli items such as fried chicken, loins, ribs, and roasts. Marinated meats may also benefit from the pad's ability to absorb excess juices under extreme conditions.

The Cryovac® Hot-Loc™ pad is available in two sizes — 6 inches by 8 inches and 4-and-one-half inches by 6 inches. A variety of pad sizes, colors, and absorbencies are available and geared to market needs.

### **Rotisserie packaging evolution**

For many years, microwaveable polypropylene trays or dual-ovenable polyester trays were the norm for packaging rotisserie chicken at the deli.

"They put a clear, dome lid on it, which certainly looks nice sitting in the case," Keith says. "The problem with this packaging is the lids never stick on that well, and they're certainly not leak-proof. Unless you hold your shopping bag a certain way, there's always some amount of juice from the rotisserie chicken that can potentially slosh out onto your car seat. That was the rationale for developing the Robbie bag."

Many insiders point to the Hot' n Handy™ flexible package from Robbie Manufacturing Inc., Lenexa, KS, as one of the most unique in new-generation, stand-up pouch packaging for hot deli foods —particularly for rotisserie chicken. Robbie demonstrated its new zippered, leak-resistant Hot' n Handy™ flexible package for hot and cold deli foods at the 2004 Food Marketing Institute convention held in Chicago.

Features include a built-in handle for portability and protection against burns; withstands the rigors of heated and cold display cases; reheats easily in the microwave oven; allows preprinted branding, preparation notes, and nutritional information in up to 10 colors of process printing; a built-in gusset that expands for standability in the display case; stores easily in a refrigerator; a large window frame and anti-fog technology for full, clear view of the product; and proprietary venting techniques to maximize crispness for fried foods or to lock in moisture and juices for meats, ribs, and rotisserie chicken.

"Look on the retail shelf and you'll see stand-up pouches everywhere because they're more convenient, recloseable, have better merchandising capabilities, and they allow for better graphics," said Irv Robinson, president of Robbie Manufacturing Inc., at the FMI show.

The Hot' n Handy film is coextruded versus laminated, he added.

"The added flexibility makes it easier to load products," he continued.

"I have seen these packages everywhere," Keith says. "They're a lot less expensive [from other competing packaging for hot deli foods] plus retailers like it because they can print their graphics on the package. However, it wasn't easy to pull all of that together —to get the print right, to get it converted, and to find the right material that would withstand the heat from the chicken. Every time I go to the store, I see a lot of these packages in both Kroger and Publix in the Atlanta market, and these stores combined make up seventy or eighty percent of that market."

### **Dual solutions**

Reynolds offers a wide variety of packaging that can be microwaved or heated in the oven, Becker says. Many of the company's products are suited for single-serve use, however, they also offer a complete line of group-feeding and family-size packaging, as well.

"We see a need for a more uniform line for consumers who want comfort foods, yet fully prepared, and we have solutions for anything," Becker continues. "Our line includes our Reservations dual-ovenable line for oven and microwave heating, our Aluminum Catering line for microwave and oven heating, and our Reynolds Microwave Supreme line of microwaveable packaging for entrées and roasters."

New packaging solutions from Reynolds include its rotisserie line of roasters made from polypropylene, and its jumbo platters.

"We are also launching our new full and one-half rib packaging, addressing the need for an improved product-to-package application fit. This is coming out for the Holidays," Becker says.

### **The future**

Packaging for hot deli foods will continue evolving, sources predict.

"It will evolve because consumers will demand it," Cook says. "People will want convenience. They don't have a lot of time to prepare foods, and the younger generation probably doesn't know how to cook as well as those who came before them. So cooked products will likely become more important — especially cooked meat items in an individual's meal decision.

"Hot deli-food packaging will have to be easy to handle, easy to carry home, likely provide reheat options, protect the temperature of the product, as well as protect the freshness and palatability," he adds.

Key for future hot deli-food packaging will be the features of portability, convenience, and food safety, Becker says.

"We are currently working on packaging to address all three," she adds. "Consumers and retailers want to have the most in a line of packaging, and we are confident this can be accomplished."

In following up on Becker's comment on the need for more portable packaging, Keith sees a trend towards more on-the-go, hand-held packaging. He points to the "go-cups" being used for salty snacks and candy.

"This seems like something somebody should be exploring," Keith says in relation to hot deli-food packaging. "A lot of people eat on the run. Sometimes it's very hard to find convenient packaging [for hot deli foods] you can carry with you."

Just what type of packaging would be conducive to on-the-go packaging for hot deli food depends on the food.

"If it's something like chicken nuggets with fries, something like a cup that fits in a cup-holder with a lid that fastens to

the top of the cup would be an excellent package, and the shape would technically keep the product warm," Keith says. "You could use paper or plastic or even a multi-compartment package if you have two foods you don't want to mix together."

Eating a hamburger has always been a messy proposition for on-the-go consumers.

"There's nothing more inconvenient than trying to eat a hamburger while you're driving a car," Keith says. "No matter how hard you try to wrap the hamburger to prevent spills, it always spills."

One possible solution is food-product oriented.

"Instead of having a full-size sandwich, why not create a smaller version like hamburger nuggets, which would be small pieces you could eat with your fingers," Keith says. "You have some foods like burritos and quesadillas, which are popular deli foods, that could easily be adapted [to that product size]."

Another packaging option for certain types of hot deli foods is the push-up package used primarily by the dairy industry.

"If somebody only had a package that worked well for a gyro or burrito — where you push the product out one bite size at a time to eat it more easily," Keith adds. "It might be something the food manufacturer might have to provide, but the deli could sell it. It could also go into convenience stores as well as other outlets."

One thing is for certain: New packaging options for hot deli foods in the future will only be limited by the imagination. NP

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