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PACKAGING TECHNOLOGY

Greater Than Its Parts

By Kathie Canning

Well-executed meal-kit packaging maintains food quality and authenticity while actively engaging consumers.

Hungry consumers short on time welcome the vast array of convenient meal solutions gracing refrigerated and frozen cases. Although many of these harried consumers seek out one-step heat-and-eat entrées or dinners, others look for convenient options that still engage them in the meal preparation process. For these folks, multi-component refrigerated and frozen meal kits fit the bill.

"They feel like they're cooking when mixing the components," notes Lisa McTigue Pierce, editor of Food & Drug Packaging.

Although convenience remains important to these consumers, they are willing to take on a few additional steps — especially when the product is deemed upscale or gourmet, says Pierce. They often associate the concepts of freshness and quality with separately packaged ingredients.

Omaha, Neb.-based ConAgra Foods Inc. separated the components of its new frozen Banquet® Crock-Pot Classics slow-cooker meals for "cooking purposes," notes Tania Graves, a company spokesperson. The ingredient packaging also reflects "how slow-cooked meals are traditionally prepared and gives a homemade feel, with the added convenience of having the sauce already mixed, the meat and vegetables already chopped, and the starch component."

For Los Angeles Harbor, Calif.-based Contessa Premium Foods, the decision to separate components within some of its frozen meal offerings was driven by a quest for authenticity, says Juliet Boghossian, marketing manager.

"We look at each meal separately, and we determine how we will package it to ensure the greatest quality, flavor and authentic finished meal possible," she says. "By separating the components, the consumer can enjoy a Kung Pao Shrimp over a fluffy bed of rice garnished with crunchy peanuts — the way Kung Pao Shrimp with Rice is traditionally served. This is more than convenience; it is restaurant quality at home."

Consumer interaction and quality were both factors behind EcoFish Inc.'s decision to separate the fish from the rub or marinade in its new upscale frozen Celebrity Chef entrees, says Henry Lovejoy, president of the Portsmouth, N.H.-based company.

"Basically, the idea behind keeping the fish separate from the marinade or rub is that the consumers can feel like they're involved in preparing the product, but it's not a difficult or a lengthy process," he says. "Also, the quality of our seafood is so high, the last thing we want to do is have it subjected to a marinade for potentially months inside of the pouch."

Anatomy of a kit

Traditionally, refrigerated and frozen meal kits have consisted of paper or plastic pouches packaged into paperboard boxes.

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A new line of five refrigerated Mexican meal kits from ConAgra's Rosarita brand sticks to that box concept. The Grilled Chicken Breast Fajita variety consists of three plastic cut-open pouches containing pre-cooked chicken strips, flour tortillas and a special "sizzle sauce," as well as a plastic tub housing the vegetables and seasonings. The tub is topped with a plastic film that consumers peel open. All four components fit into a rectangular paperboard box that sports a front see-through window.

EcoFish, too, went with a paperboard box for its Celebrity Chef offerings.

"Retailers really like [how] it stands up and merchandizes really well," says Lovejoy. "Inside, there's a 7-ounce quick-frozen and vacuum-packed portion of seafood, and there's a 2-ounce packet of all-natural marinade or spice rub, depending on the variety."

The box format — with plenty of panels and a back circular window that shows off the fish — also allows EcoFish to convey important information about the company and the product to consumers, notes Lovejoy. Here, consumers can glean information about the company's commitment to environmental sustainability, peruse product preparation suggestions and even read a heartfelt letter penned by Lovejoy and his wife.

Increasingly, however, meal kits are being launched in stand-up plastic pouches, reflecting the rising popularity of this packaging format across the board.

Banquet's Crock-Pot Classics come in a stand-up plastic pouch with an easy-tear strip. The Stroganoff with Beef and Noodles variety, for example, holds a plastic pouch of noodles and another plastic pouch of sauce. The beef and vegetable mixture sits freely within the main packaging.

"The sauce component is mixed with water," says Graves, "then the meat and vegetable component is added to the slow cooker and cooked for four to eight hours, depending on the setting. The starch component is combined 30 minutes prior to serving."

The Chicken Stir-Fry variety in Birds-Eye Foods' new Voila! Frozen entrée line comes in a stand-up pouch containing chicken and vegetables and a separate sauce pouch. The sauce pouch is designed to withstand a warm-water thaw before its contents are added to the meat-vegetable mix.

Outside the box and pouch arena, Sara Lee is creating packaging excitement in the refrigerated lunch kit sector. The Cincinnati-based company's new Hillshire Farm® Deli Select Combos line combines plastic-wrapped portions of a lunchmeat and a complementary cheese variety in reusable plastic GladWare® containers.

What's next?

Some packaging improvements can be anticipated as this niche market expands.

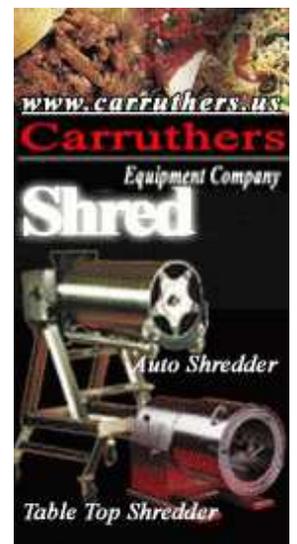
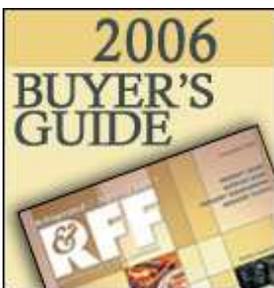
"I expect two key innovations affecting the meal kit," says Huston Keith, principal of Marietta, Ga.-based Keymark Associates. "One is improvements in food technology and packaging where ingredients can be mixed in the package, or separated only by a wall or film that the consumer could break without opening the package. This has already been done for two-component glues, where the consumer squeezes or bends the package to break the separating membrane.

"And continued growth of kits where different components are in separate package compartments that maintain unique conditions for the preservation of the food," he continues. "This has been done in trays and rigid packages — I would expect pouch technology to develop the same feature."

Midland, Mich.-based Dow Chemical Co. recently introduced an enhanced polyethylene resin that could boost speed and bolster security in meal kit packaging, says Jeff Wooster, the company's value chain manager for flexible packaging.



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"ELITE 5500G, which offers improved seal integrity for high-speed packaging applications, can help a meal kit processor run their packaging machines faster and rest assured that the package is secure and its contents protected throughout the value chain," he says.

No matter how innovative the packaging or packaging materials, food processors should be careful not to overdo it, component wise.

"Anything beyond three or four components is pushing into the realm of preparing food from scratch, in my opinion," says Keith. "The convenience of a kit begins to be questionable." RFF

One-handed convenience

Taking the "meal kit" concept to the foodservice level is the new Easy Carry Carrier System. Designed by Costa Mesa, Calif.-based Easy Carry LLC, the packaging won First Place in the 2004 QSR magazine/Foodservice Packaging Institute Foodservice Packaging Awards competition for its ability to sell more products, more conveniently and more safely.

The tiered packaging allows the customer to carry everything — food and drinks included — in one hand. Manufactured by Graphic Packaging International Inc. of Marietta, Ga., from sturdy lightweight cardboard, the innovative carrier includes a food tray and an enclosed drink storage area. The design ensures the drinks do not touch the food. One or more of the 10 or more panels can be printed with advertising and/or other promotional messages.

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