

PLAYING CHICKEN

Versatility, healthy reputation continue to push category growth.

Few categories have expanded as impressively as the prepared poultry sector during the past few decades or so.

InfoScan data from Information Resources Inc. of Chicago show the frozen poultry category alone posting sales gains of 7.8 percent during the 52-week period ending April 17, 2005 (excluding Wal-Mart), reaching more than \$2.2 billion. Unit sales were up 4.3 percent during that timeframe.

Chicken continues to be the main act here, with U.S. per-capita consumption doubling since 1977. The bird's versatility and healthy reputation have transformed it into a family staple. In fact, the National Chicken Council reports that the average family of four will place more than 200 pounds of chicken in its grocery cart in 2005 alone.

As time-pressed consumers place greater importance on convenience, "the definition of cooking itself is changing from scratch cooking to meal assembly," notes the council. Chicken processors have responded with a wide variety of "convenience-oriented" chicken products, including fresh and frozen "partially and fully prepared individual items and entrees." Convenience also is being enhanced, adds the council, through the "deboning of both dark and white meat, mari-

nation, sizing and packaging."

Trends on the chicken side include a strong interest in wings. Indeed, the council reports that 3.5 billion wings were sold in retail grocery stores in 2004. Many of these products were heat-and-eat items featuring bold barbecue-type flavors.

Other trends on the retail poultry side include breast strips, popcorn chicken and fajitas, notes Dan Emery, vice president of marketing for Pilgrim's Pride Corp.

"Deli chickens are hot in retail, too," he notes. "I think the deli section of the retail store is the fastest-growing section of the store, really acting as a competitor to the restaurant sector."

Hot flavors on the retail poultry side include Asian and Asian fusion, Mexican, Italian/Mediterranean and Caribbean, says Emery. Pilgrim's Pride soon will be introducing Peking logs — or whole birds without the giblets — on the deli side, he adds.

Pilgrim's Pride recently launched its EatWellStayHealthy chicken line, which boasts Fully Cooked Szechwan Chicken Breast Tenderloins, Fully Cooked Key Lime Flavor Chicken Breast Fillets and six other chicken items. All products meet USDA speci-



Healthful made easy.

fications in the areas of fat, cholesterol and sodium to allow the regulated word "healthy" to be used on product packaging.

"Consumers want healthy foods, but are unwilling to trade off convenience or taste to get [them]," stresses Bo Pilgrim, chairman and founder of Pilgrim's Pride.

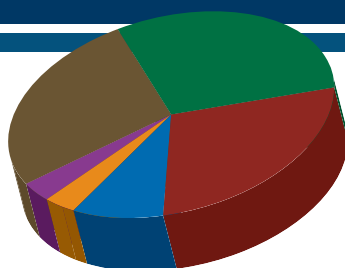
ConAgra Foods' new Butterball Refrigerated Chicken and Turkey Strips also aim to appease consumers' concerns for health and convenience. The fully cooked premium breast strips come in Honey Roasted Chicken, Oven Roasted Turkey, Southwestern Chicken and three other varieties, and can be served cold in a salad or heated up within their microwavable tubs for use in pasta, wraps or fajita dishes.

Also new to the Butterball line is the Extra Thin Sliced Turkey Breast line in a Ziploc Tub. Designed to "bring the deli to the refrigerator case," the line comes in Rotisserie, Oven-Roasted, Smoked and Honey Roasted varieties.

Breaded items remain popular, especially with kids. Perdue Farms' new Frittered Popcorn Chicken Breast Chunks come in a 26-ounce stand-up plastic bag with an easy-open Zip-Pak slider. Simmons Foods launched Cheesy Cheesy Popcorn Chicken in 19.2-ounce round cardboard cartons. — **K.C.**

Frozen Chicken* — Top 5 Vendors by Dollar Share

Tyson Foods	30.5%
Private Label	25.8%
ConAgra	9.4%
Pilgrim's Pride	3.7%
Advance Food	3.6%
All others	27.0%



*Includes chicken substitutes
Source: Information Resources Inc., InfoScan data, total sales for U.S. supermarkets, drug stores and mass merchandisers, excluding Wal-Mart, 52-week period ending April 17, 2005.