

Refrigerated Dinner Entrées

By Lynn Petrak

WHAT'S COOKING? New heat-'n-eat refrigerated entrées are invading the refrigerated and deli cases.

The refrigerated entrée category is a good example of the convergence of trends spawned by consumer clamor for taste and convenience. In a segment that barely existed a decade ago, new offerings are being touted to retailers regularly. In some cases, this is causing meat departments to set up designated case sections specifically for heat-and-eat, meat-based meals.

restaurant-style Osso Buco, and colorful tubs of pre-seasoned, pre-cooked, shredded, and ground meat.

As the merchandise expands, sales follow. Consumers purchased nearly \$682.7 million worth of refrigerated dinner entrées from January 2003 to January 2004, a 4.4 percent increase, relays research from Information Resources Inc, (IRI), Chicago, IL. And that's not counting the behind-the-glass deli case or the formidable frozen meal section.

The category is still comprised of many different types of products. Pre-portioned, fully cooked protein pieces, like chicken or steak strips, is one popular sub-category. Buckets of barbecue meat or ground meat with taco seasonings make up another growing segment. Garnering much of the attention is the plethora of heat-and-serve entrées with center-of-the-plate proteins like roast beef, pork, turkey, and chicken often combined with sauces, gravies, and vegetables. Such products were initially launched by regional brands like Morton, IL-based RMH Foods, Selma, CA, Harris Ranch, and now dominated by big players like Springdale, AR-based Tyson Foods Inc. and Austin, MN-based Hormel Foods Corp.

A look at top-selling brands reveals the diversity of refrigerated entrée products. For the past year, IRI found that private-label refrigerated entrées led the category with \$105.5 million in sales. St. Paul, MN-based Lloyd's Barbecue Co. refrigerated entrées, which includes a line of shredded barbecue meats, was second, with \$98 million in sales, followed by Northfield, IL-based Kraft Foods' *Louis Rich*® carving board pre-cooked meats at \$79.6 million, *Hormel* refrigerated entrées at \$76.5 million. and *Tyson* refrigerated entrées at \$51.4 million.

The latest entries in this field reflect consumer interest in convenience, taste, and variety. On the flavor side, new refrigerated entrée products include such SKUs as Tyson's Brown Sugar and Maple Glazed Ham, and Greeley, CO-based Swift



What started with a trickle in the mid-1990s with a fully cooked pot roast or two has cascaded into a flood of microwaveable, ovenable, and boil-in-a-bag options, increasingly with more diverse flavor profiles. The pot roasts and meatloaves remain, but are now joined by items like Cajun-seasoned pork,

& Co.'s *Swift Premium*® Teriyaki Oven Roasters™, to name just two.

Similarly, deli operators are making room for intriguing new products, such as breaded Pork Fingers from Smithfield, VA-based Smithfield Deli Group, and savory Popcorn Chicken Nuggets from Salisbury, MD-based Perdue Farms.

Roast boast

Just because Swift & Co. has a long history in the meat case doesn't mean that it doesn't pursue the latest product formats and flavors. Last year, the Greeley, CO-based brand introduced a five-item line of heat-and-serve roasts under the *Swift Premium*® Fresh Roasters™ name.

Available in Pepper Grill Beef, Savory Flavor Beef, Pepper Grill Pork, Cajun Pork and Teriyaki Pork, the fully cooked refrigerated entrées are vacuum packaged in a disposable oven-ready tray with a windowed outer package. The cost is competitive with other heat-and-serve entrées, priced at a range of \$4.26 and \$5.96 a pound.

Jim Herlihy, vice president of communications, says Swift & Co. wanted to enter this growing segment because it understood the importance of simple-to-use products among a certain portion of the population, from busy families to empty-nesters to older consumers seeking a hearty and healthful meal in minutes. "The innovation is the convenience," he says.

The product is also considered revolutionary because of its packaging, which saves consumers even more time during the heating process.

"The ovenable cooking tray is new to the category, eliminating a handling step for the consumer and enhancing food safety," Herlihy explains. "There is outstanding taste, and the convenience of going from the refrigerator to the oven to the plate in thirty to forty minutes."

Feedback from retailers and consumers has been positive, recounts Herlihy, noting that the product also has received accolades from the meat industry. "Three of our products were among the ten finalists for the 2004 Consumer Choice Pork Awards sponsored by the National Pork Board [NPB], and the Pepper Grill Loin Filet was named one of five winners," he reports.

Swift is looking at more varieties for its oven-ready roasts, but there is another notable change coming as well: beginning in May, the line will be dubbed *Oven Roasters*®.

The veal deal

While the first fully cooked refrigerated entrées in the meat case included comfort-food favorites like meatloaf, pot roast, and turkey breast with gravy, it was only a matter of time before offerings grew more eclectic. Recognizing that consumers want convenience and yet still crave restaurant-style dishes, Catelli Brothers Inc., Collingswood, NJ, has developed a new fully cooked Osso Buco.

The company took an opportunity to meet both food-service and retail niches with this new product. Available for restaurants as well as refrigerated retail meat cases, the fully cooked veal entrée is designed to provide a traditional savory dinner without the hassle or the cleanup. Consumers simply take the product out of the package and boil it in the provided bag for 15 minutes. Catelli's Osso Buco is made with veal, sweet Marsala wine, onion, tomatoes, Italian spices, carrots, and veal demi-glace, all slow-cooked with garlic. "We marry the shanks with the sauce, and five hours later you get tender meat falling off the bone," notes Director of Marketing Doug Buchanan.

The company has high hopes for the product as a true meal solution.

"People don't have three to four hours of prep time to make this product," explains Buchanan. "It actually takes five hours for us to make it. And then we have the cooling time and packaging time, so it can take a whole day just for a short run."

Catelli's Osso Buco also addresses the issue of the consumers' lack of knowledge in cooking veal — which tends to be on the low side of the protein consumption spectrum at retail but higher for away-from-home dining. "It's probably the most complex of cuts for people — they don't know whether they should grill it or bake it," says Buchanan of the shank portion, adding that the decision to offer a pre-cooked veal option was a natural one. "We saw the success the industry had with chicken and beef entrées and the spread they have."

Retailers can expect more fully-cooked veal entrées from Catelli, perhaps even later this year, Buchanan says. "We are preparing a lamb shank and veal cutlets with other sauces," he remarks. "We are now ready to finalize the package design and to get samples out to our sales people."

Counter intelligence

A lot of new product activity has centered on the refrigerated meat case, but the deli service counter is equally

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as prolific when it comes to innovative meat-based entrées created for on-the-go shoppers. The Smithfield brand, which has made inroads of its own with heat-and-eat entrées, is also a mainstay in many deli service cases with an assortment of new items routinely being shipped to retailers. "The consumer may pick up one thing in the deli and buy something else in the meat department," remarks Jason Seely, director of sales for precooked foods for Smithfield deli group and Smithfield foodservice group, Smithfield, VA.

Recently, Smithfield Deli Group unveiled a variety of unique fully cooked products for the deli case. One product line creating a buzz is Smithfield's new Pork Fingers, available in Fiesta Tortilla, Italiano, and Southern Sweet cornbread varieties. "They are similar to a chicken tender, except they are pork," explains Seely, adding that the Pork Fingers can be merchandised both in the deli case and in a hot foods kiosk.

Another new line is a series of Edible Bread Cocks, filled with soups, chilis, or stews. "It's a soup crock made out of bread, which comes with a lid, and we are offering Cuban-style soup, pulled pork chili with beans, black bean and smoked sausage soup, French onion soup, clam chowder soup, and chicken tortilla," Seeley says. "Again, they can be done a couple of different ways — they can be served hot behind the glass or put into a soup program."

REFRIGERATED DINNERS/ENTRÉES

TOP 10 BRANDS

BRAND	\$ DOLLAR SALES	% CHANGE YR AGO
Private label	\$ 105,524,300	-22.73%
Lloyd's rfg.	98,057,880	6.79
Louis Rich Carving Board	79,580,420	-7.56
Hormel	76,510,100	17.14
Tyson	51,449,470	16.69
Perdue ShortCuts	41,893,220	1.21
Perdue Done It	35,984,840	5.33
Kraft FreshPrep	30,899,060	2164.43
Thomas E. Wilson*	29,031,630	-40.11
Old El Paso	17,453,830	40.06
Total category	\$ 682,651,000	4.4%

*Thomas E. Wilson products are in the process of being re-named and re-launched under the Tyson brand, following Tyson's acquisition of IBP Inc.

DATA REFLECTS LATEST 52 WEEKS ENDING JANUARY 25, 2004

Smithfield is venturing into prepared side dishes as well, offering new Potato Croquettes in Original, Bacon and Cheese, and Ham and Cheese varieties, along with meatless Sweet Potato Pockets. Seely says the extension into such foodstuffs represents a paradigm shift of sorts for the mainstay brand. "Smithfield in the past has been known as a pork company. We've gone from being a pork company to being a protein company to now going to a food company," he points out. "One of our big successes is that customers come to us as a one-stop supplier." **MDR**

HITTING THE SHELF

RETAIL MEAT CASE/ RETAIL REFRIGERATED CASE

Fully Cooked Osso Buco

Catelli Brothers Inc.

Package: Boil-in-bag presentation in a plastic tray with paperboard sleeve and plastic over-wrap

Suggested price: \$7.99

Distribution: National
Catelli Brothers Inc.
50 Ferry Avenue
Collingswood, NJ 08103
(800) 833-VEAL (8325)

Retail account manager:
Monica D'Ancona, email:
mdancona@catellibrothers.com
www.catellibrothers.com

Hans' Wraps™ Meal Solutions

Penn Valley Farms Ltd.,
Chicago

Varieties: Sonoma, Hell's
Kitchen, Santorini

Package: Individually wrapped
sausage and pastry wraps in a
paperboard box

Suggested price: \$3.99

Distribution: National
Penn Valley Farms Ltd.
6807 West Irving Park Rd.
Chicago, IL 60634
(773) 685-9929 or 800-270-7366
www.hansallnatural.com

SO EASY Stuffed Turkey Breast

Jennie-O Turkey Store™,
a Hormel Foods brand

Varieties: Swiss Cheese and
Ham; Pepper Cheese and Rice;
Cheddar Cheese and Broccoli

Package: Two pieces per 12-oz.
package

Suggested Price: \$6.99

Distribution: National
Jennie-O Turkey Store
2505 SW Willmar Avenue
Willmar, MN 56201
800-328-1756
www.jennie-o.com

Mountaire Sizzlin' Sensations

Mountaire Farms

Varieties: Chicken Alfredo and
Chicken Fajitas

Package: Meal kits 29.5-oz
plastic wrapped foam tray

Suggested price: \$5.96

Distribution: National
Mountaire Farms
P.O. Box 710
Selbyville, DE 19975
(800) 441-8263 or (302) 436-8241

Swift Premium® Oven Roasters™

Swift Brands

Varieties: Teriyaki Pork; Pepper
Grill Pork; Pepper Grill Beef;
Homestyle Pork (available May
2004); Homestyle Beef Roast
(available May 2004)

Package: 18-oz. to 20-oz., ran-
dom weight
Suggested price: Varies, \$4.99
to \$5.99

Distribution: National
Swift & Company
1770 Promontory Circle
Greeley, CO 80634
(970) 506-8000 or 800-727-5366
Sales contact: Kelly Carmin,
kcarmin@swiftbrands.com
www.swiftbrands.com and
www.swiftpremium.com

Tyson® Heat 'N Eat™ fully cooked entrées

Tyson Foods Inc.

Varieties: Beef Pot Roast;
Maple & Brown Sugar Glazed
Ham; Carved Turkey Breast in
Gravy

Package: 1-lb. package, includ-
ing tray with plastic peelable lid
Suggested price: \$7.99

Distribution: National
Tyson Foods, Inc.
P.O. Box 2020
Springdale, AR 72765
(479) 290-4000

www.tyson.com or
www.tysoninc.com

DELI SERVICE CASE/ HOT FOOD CASE

Perdue® Case Ready Chicken Tenders, Wings, and Nuggets

Perdue Farms

Package: 12/12-oz.
Suggested price: \$3.99 to \$4.99
per pound
Distribution: National

Perdue Farms
P.O. Box 1656
Horsham, PA 19044-6656
(800) 473-7383
www.perdue.com

Pork Fingers Smithfield Deli Group

Varieties: Southern Sweet
Cornbread; Fiesta Tortilla;
Italiano

Package: 1-oz. pieces avail-
able in a 160-piece, 10-pound
case

Suggested price: n/a
Distribution: National
Smithfield Foods Inc.
200 Commerce Street
Smithfield, VA 23430
(888) 366-6767 or 757-365-3000
www.smithfieldfoods.com