

So what's on the horizon for retort pouches? Don't expect a major switch of high volume products right away. Most growth is coming from new specialties. Preferred Brands has a line of Indian and Thai food entrees that come in foil-based retort pouches and have shelf life of 18 months. It's perfect for slow-moving products like these.

Restaurants and other foodservice operators also like using retort pouches. They have been key users of hot-fill and ambient fill pouches, saving the space cost and safe handling issues of #10 cans and other rigid packages. Now that technology permits the packaging of retorted foods like tuna, expect them to increase usage dramatically. Prepared foods, especially, will be key targets for conversion as operators continue to take steps to offset labor shortages and attendant higher costs.

Even after major improvements in equipment for pouch packaging equipment, it is still much less than replacing a multi-million dollar high-speed canning lines. While food processors are unlikely to remove a functioning canning line to replace it with a retort packaging, they are very reluctant to put in new ones or to replace one that has past its useful life.

New markets

There are many other opportunities for shelf-stable foods in retort pouches. In the soup market, Stockpot has shown that the pouch works in the refrigerated case — can Campbell make it work for just a piece of the 4 billion unit canned soup market? Opportunities abound in the 1.5 billion unit baby food market and the giant (5 billion unit) canned vegetable market.

Retort pouches are unbreakable, easy to open and easy to transport but many users more, like clarity, servability and reclosability. The technology is here, but packagers must be convinced the product will sell. For tomato products (2 billion units), hot-fill pouches have been available for years, yet many products stay in cans.

There is a growing future with retort pouches, especially in foodservice and in selected niches. The unit volume is huge, the economics are becoming more compelling and there are consumer and retailer benefits. We've seen a change as machinery costs decline in conjunction with the desire for convenience rising. Like the growth of hot fill foodservice pouches in the 1990s, we see the growth of retort foodservice and consumer pouches being the hot growth area of the 2000s.