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Retort Pouches on a Roll

Retort pouches, trays and cartons are bringing new convenience and second looks from consumers.

• *by Huston Keith*

Not so long ago, retort pouches were used only for specialties such as meals-ready-to-eat (MREs) for the military. Only overseas were they used widely for consumer products. But since 2000, the stream of U. S. consumer products has turned into a river.

First, there was creamed chipped beef and pet food. Then came cooked chicken, meals and flavored rice. Now chili in retortable cartons and lunchmeats are seeing success in pouches. Even vegetables in clear trays may soon appear in supermarkets. To learn how to achieve success in this market, packagers and suppliers are crowding into Retort Pouch/Tray 2005.

INGREDIENTS OF SUCCESS

The Japanese, with small refrigerators in tight living areas have long understood the value of convenient, space-saving retort pouches and trays. And new pouches, cups and tubes from pouch leader DNP will increase the appeal.

Europeans, facing similar constraints, have also more readily paid the premium for the merits of the pouch. The latest products from Huhtamaki, the leading retort laminate producer in Europe, will increase the value of these products.

More Americans are discovering what our soldiers have long known – food in a retort pouch or tray tastes better than the same product in a can. The flat profile allows faster heat penetration and shorter cooking times, says Dr. Magdy Hefnawy, President of Ag-Tech International, Greeneville, TN. The result is less overcooking near the outside of the container and much better moisture retention.

A pouch can be opened with a simple tug across the top - no can opener required. And there are no sharp edges to cut the fingers of the careless or unwary. Zip-Pak's retortable zippers provide easy reclosability and open the door for unique uses. Spouts from IPN USA help get liquid products out of the pouch with less mess.

Food in pouches and trays is often easier to prepare. Tyson Foods pre-cooked chicken make preparing an entrée or salad a snap. Consumers appreciate the ease of its ready-to-heat creamed chipped beef from Smithfield's Esskay for a quick, satisfying meal. And retort pouches bring Tasty Bites' exotic Indian and Thai entrées to every home, says Ashok Vasudevan of Preferred Brands of India.

SHOWING OFF THE BENEFITS

Retortable pouches, trays and cartons have both the advantage and disadvantage of being unique packages. They stand out from their counterparts on the shelf, but they lack the trusted familiarity of traditional cans and jars.

For both larger graphic display space and stackability, Hormel has taken its Stagg and Hormel chili and put them in Tetra Recart retortable cartons. They can also display a third more packages than cans in the same space.

Despite these advantages, will people buy chili in a “juice box”? Tetra Recart and Hormel are taking no chances and are working together to educate consumers on the benefits of the package, dubbed SmartPak.

A pouch can be clear to show appetizing products, often with Ceramis silicon dioxide films from Celplast. And options keep expanding. Kureha’s new Besela® polyacrylic acid film offers an unprecedented combination of barrier and flexibility. Transparent nanotech barrier coatings will soon be a commercial reality from InMat. Then a new study from RJR Packaging will help you choose the best clear film for your pouch.

Retort pouches and trays are just a niche, said many experts, not for commodities like vegetables. But they’re now on French supermarkets shelves in clear trays, according to equipment maker Multivac.

OVERCOMING THE COST HURDLE

Despite the growth surge, higher costs have kept pouches, trays and cartons under 10% of the 30+ billion metal food cans used annually. Materials often carry a premium, and the lower equipment speeds for filling and sealing equipment are an even larger obstacle.

Many have predicted that retort pouch-filling speed would never equal can-filling speed. But Amec has designed a line capable of 1000 per minute – a whopping 2000 per minute in duplex form..

In some instances, Sonoco has found that a lower cost three-ply material instead of four-ply can be a viable option. Henkel Liofol has developed warm-applied solventless adhesives to improve lamination cost and productivity..

KEEPING THE MOMENTUM

What else will it take to keep consumer’s attention on pouches? The industry has to help consumers understand the significant value of the technology, states Consumer Network’s Mona Doyle. Combined with continued cost reductions, fast growth will continue for years.

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