

Case closed. Case-ready meat is here to stay: as Wal-Mart leads the way for retailers, the future for case-ready meat is now—even if its growth is slow but steady - Innovations: case-ready meat

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If you were holding your breath, waiting for an explosive case-ready meat revolution by 2002 as predicted many years ago, stop. Inhale.

It just hasn't happened.

But that doesn't mean case-ready isn't impacting the supermarket meat department and what consumers are looking for in their meat choices. Slow but steady, case-ready meats are gaining momentum as an emerging shift moves meat cutting from behind supermarket counters to tightly controlled processing and packaging plants.

Percentages vary as to how much case-ready meat is currently found in supermarkets today. According to Melvin Hunt, professor of Meat Science in the Department of Animal Sciences and Industry at Kansas State University, case-ready meats represent about 6%, to 8% of the retail meat market. But some industry experts estimate case-ready numbers currently fall between 15% and 20%. And, by 2005, case-ready meat packages may hit close to the 30% mark.

Either way, case-ready is making a sizable influx in the marketplace.

In-store, in-home benefits

If growth in the case-ready arena seems slow, resistance can be attributed to both retailers and consumers. Many retailers with back-room butchers believe their customers will go elsewhere if they eliminate on-site meat cutting. And many consumers feel that case-ready meat can't possibly be as fresh as the meat that is cut at the store.

However, according to Huston Keith, principal of Keymark Associates, because there has been a drop off in people going into the meat cutting field, it is difficult for stores to find qualified employees in those positions. Consequently, a lack of qualified meat cutters opened the doors to accepting a greater quantity of case-ready meat into the supermarket meat department.

Other factors contributing to an increase in case-ready include:

* Consumer convenience and appeal. Consumers don't have to deal with leaky or bloody packages. Plus they want to know exactly what they're getting. Packages and labeling can help consumers understand more about the product.

* Better and more technically sound packaging. Expanding technologies--such as modified atmosphere packaging and vacuum packaging--are making what's old, new again.

Of course, another boon to case-ready is its acceptance by Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart Supercenter stores have gone completely case-ready. And, by the end of 2002, case-ready flesh meat will eventually be at the center of Wal-Mart's Sam's Club meat marketing.

"Case-ready meat is crucial to our plans," Lee Scott, president and CEO of Wal-Mart, said at a recent investor's meeting. "It is becoming the best way to deliver quality at a low price for our customers."

Who's ready for case-ready?

One of the keys to successful case-ready meat is by making it appealing to time consumer by providing quality, safety and shelf appeal. IBP Inc., a division of Tyson Foods, has introduced a new line of fresh beef cuts referred to as Case-ready Trimmed (CRT) in response to retailer demand.

According to Mark Gingerich, assistant vice president, customer education at IBP, the new line includes products that are "a step beyond the streamlined characteristics of IBP's user friendly boxed beef." The benefits include less meat-cutter training, improved sales per labor hour, uniform finished product and compatibility with case-ready retail programs.

IBP's attitude fits in with Keith's assertion that there has been a downturn in people going into the meat-cutting business. Demand for the CRT

product has been driven by the reduced supply of skilled meat cutters.

"Meat cutters are some of the most expensive retail workers around, yet people can get comparable jobs in the industrial or trade sectors that are more appealing, easier or cleaner while making just as much money," says Keith. "This downturn has created a problem for the retail manager trying to keep sufficient quantities of [meat in the case, which has led to using case-ready meat to keep an abundance of meat on hand."

Going to ground

Another driving factor for retailers to accept case-ready meat is the movement to reduce or even eliminate ground beef production at the store level. As retailers are buying closer trimmed product from processors, they have less trim available to go into ground products.

With the case of poultry, pork and ground beef, every time a store has to prepare those grinds for retail presentation--the whole grinder has to be ripped down and cleaned out to prevent cross-species contamination. And, while some retailers still grind their own meat products, the cutters don't like the extra work, mess or risk associated with the process.

Case-ready ground products become a boon to retailers who feature a lot of ground beef during high demand periods. By having ground products in stock and always available, retailers can deal with seasonal demands--such as during the summer when grill cooking is popular--more efficiently. It allows for easier merchandising for off-hours and holidays.

Also, retailers can choose which type of ground beef they want to stock on their shelves. For instance, they can choose specific lean points to have on hand that may be more difficult to process in the store.

Another consumer demand is ensuring food safety and case-ready meat suppliers like IBP and Excel have federally inspected plants with fully-managed Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) systems in place. In most cases, fresh meat is source-identified with each package carrying a serial number identifying its origin and time of production.

In a meat case near you

Case-ready meat packages are being developed that are not only more attractive but are more informative. Again, using ground beef as an example, many people may not be aware of the broad selection of ground beef products available outside of the in-store packed beef typically found in the supermarket meat case. Beef selections can include beef produced from a specific section of the beef carcass or with a certain lean-to-fat ratio.

Many meat processors have adopted color-coded labeling systems allowing consumers to make informed choices in their beef selections. The easy-to-read labels include nutritional facts panels, including fat content, that can also help consumers select products that fit their varying dietary needs.

In some cases, the processor/ supplier may also keep a stock of labels in their primary distribution center for the convenience of the retail stores they serve. Store labels can also be affixed to the packages giving the impression of private-label branding.

Besides finding the right label, deciding which meat tray can be a challenge. As simple as it may seem, the tray is an integral part of the package. One of the biggest turn-offs for consumers are trays that drip or pool with blood. Studies have shown that consumers are drawn toward plastic meat trays because they are leak proof and durable.

Pros/cons of colored trays

Solid barrier polypropylene (PP) trays used in modified-atmosphere packaging (MAP) enables processors to produce attractive case-ready packages.

For instance, a pearlized look or a range of colors and designs can help differentiate MAP packaging on the shelf.

However, colorant as a component of the tray can be more expensive per pound than when using regular resins. And colorant must be approved for food contact. Manufacturing efficiencies may be compromised when the plant has to change over from one color to another on the same equipment. When stamping out a tray from a web of plastic, the skeletal scrap gets ground up right away and is recycled through a grinding system right back into the extruder. So when you're changing from one color to another, you have to purge the whole system. Besides file additional purging step, there also may be changeover costs to do so.

Packaging Improvements

If case-ready meat is to be accepted by the retailer and the consumer, it should deliver improved safety and sanitation while maintaining a longer shelf life. With this burgeoning influx of case-ready acceptance, where does the packaging technology for case-ready stand?

While modified atmosphere packaging is the mainstay of case-ready packaging, technological advances in this area have not exactly been abundant.

Explains Keith, "Many of the common technologies used for case-ready packaging have been around for 25 or more years. There's no doubt that right now machines are better, faster. Testing is more thorough. But the improvements have been incremental."

Traditional retailers and meat packers agree that consumers insist that their fresh meat is a "cherry" red color, which is indicative of oxygenated oxymyoglobin meat pigment. But high oxygen injected to maintain red coloring can react with the meat, altering its flavor. And oxidized meat pigment eventually turns brown, which sends a signal to consumers that the meat is bad. On the other hand, meat under reduced oxygen is purple--another color not favored by consumers.

But reduced oxygen favors longer microbiological and enzymatic shelf life and is the reasoning behind the use of barrier bags for primal cuts and ground beef in distribution to retail back rooms. When exposed to air or higher levels of oxygen, the purple color converts to red oxymyoglobin.

Color me red

Although purple meat was introduced on the consumer level during the 1980s and early 1990s--for instance, as vacuum-packaged steaks--the effort failed. Simply, purple meat turned off the consumer even when labels were adhered to the package stating that the color was normal and once the package was opened, the meat would bloom to the more appealing and, therefore, accepted red coloration.

Accepting purple meat is a matter of educating the consumer. MAP Technology experts concur that consumers are becoming more ready to accept purple coloration because, over the years, they have had more opportunities to see meats before blooming takes place whether from seeing it in butcher shops, at outdoor barbecues or in restaurants.

Right now the master bag with or without any alteration of internal atmosphere appears to have a larger market share. The reason for this may revolve around the use of conventional primary packaging that is comfortable and credible to consumers and retailers.

High-oxygen packaging in barrier trays with barrier heat-seal lidding is strong on the marketplace now largely because of Wal-Mart's conversion to case ready. The main format for case-ready still uses MAP but the technology could be considered in somewhat of a state of flux.

With MAP, the normal air is pulled out and replaced with inert gas, usually nitrogen. This slows the pigmentation changes caused by normal oxygen permeation. As oxygen enters the package, extended shelf life is compromised.

There are combinations, such as the right mixture of oxygen with gases such as nitrogen and some carbon dioxide, that will make the meat bright red while extending shelf life to up to 14 days.

A newer--albeit experimental--variation in MAP packaging has meat put into a total nitrogen atmosphere. This technique extends the life of the meat much longer than the normal MAP options--theoretically a shelf life of up to 30 days. The problem with this technology is that the product turns purple or brown, which goes back to consumers having problems with coloration. But the innovation addresses this issue. The package is configured so that when the meat is ready for the consumer, a little flap gets cut off the top of the package. Then, a food-grade oxygen bottle that comes with the package is used to purge the nitrogen. The oxygen returns the meat to a consumer-ready bright red just prior to being displayed in the meat case.

"Processors and retailers must keep abreast of updated technologies and their market requirements," says Keith. "With all the options out there, from fresh to pre-cooked case-ready meats, it will really be up to the consumer to accept the format--which they are."

RELATED ARTICLE: What else is lurking in your grocer's meat case?

Walk into any grocery store's meat department and you expect to see a "sea of red meat." But there are other products--from pre-cooked meats and poultry to meal accessories calling for fresh meat--inching their way into meat cases, providing alternatives to fresh meat. In these cases, convenience rules!

Tyson has recently released a line of fully cooked hams, pork tenderloins and roasts that have been slow-baked and carved for convenience. Produced by IBP, Thomas E. Wilson meat products can be microwaved, boiled in a bag or cooked in a conventional oven. The package--a tray and sleeve system that is attractive and functional--is contemporary but traditional with a high-quality product image and easy-to-read heating instructions. The product is vacuum-sealed in an inner bag.

Kraft's Freshmade Creations are found in the grocer's meat case but the dinner kits include all the necessary ingredients except for the meat. Vegetables, pasta, cheese, seasonings and sauces are contained in clear film pouches or thermoformed trays, which are included in the primary paperboard packaging. Ingredients can be layered with selected fresh meats in the enclosed baking pan. Preparation time is about 30 minutes in a conventional oven. Another consumer bonus--the product has a 105 day refrigerated shelf life.

Even hot dogs have gone upscale with Dietz & Wetson's Deli Franks. The company switched the product's packaging to Stora Enso's Coated Kraft Back Board (CKB) to reduce packaging costs while maintaining high graphic quality. The board is also chemically and microbiologically pure and suitable for other consumer pre-cooked meat applications.

Benefits of case-ready

For the Retailer:

- * Reduces merchandising labor. Open the case and peel off the top layer of film. Simply label the package and place in display case.
- * Reduces potential for contamination because packaging is done at the point of origin and is traceable.
- * Expands variety. Increases lean content offerings and captures incremental sales without making big batches of product.
- * Reduces out-of-stocks. Refill cases without restarting grinder, even after hours.
- * Assures attractive bloom, Appealing "red" bloom about 30 minutes after peeling top film from product package.

For the consumer:

- * Leak proof packaging that prevents messy juices from spilling.
- * Easy-to-stack packaging is neater and makes home storage more convenient.
- * Freezer ready, eliminating rewrap.
- * Reduce contamination. Sealing at point of origin can reduce cross contamination and unnecessary handling.

For more information

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