

 **The National Provisioner Magazine - May 2005**

PACKAGING TECHNOLOGY

Retort Pouches Heating Up

By Sam Gazdziak, Senior Editor

More meat and poultry processors are turning to retort pouches for their packaging needs.

It started in pet food before working its way over to people food. The retort pouch, a staple of supermarket shelves overseas, has become a staple of several food markets in the United States. Although it hasn't made the tin can obsolete, interest among food packers and processors remains high, and the pouches are making headway into the meat and poultry field.

Huston Keith, principal for Keymark Associates, Marietta, GA, says that there are about 800 million to 1 billion pouches sold in the United States and Canada, mostly for pet food. "Meals ready-to-eat (MREs) and tuna are other key markets," he says.

Consumers have had some resistance to retort pouches, Keith says, which helps to explain why their use in the U.S. is less than in Europe and Japan. "However, consumers have warmed to the benefits of pouches in the last few years - easy opening without can openers, easy dispensing without utensils, better flavor, less moisture loss, to name a few," he adds. "The tuna and pet food packagers are very pleased with the benefits. Others are waiting to see."

Existing packaging needs also create a dilemma for food processors, explains Stan Sacharow, executive director of the Packaging Group Inc., Princeton, NJ, who says food processors "have a significant infrastructure in canning, and it's difficult and expensive to convert over into retort pouches. They've got to get a new product line, really, to make it pay."

Nevertheless, he adds, the market for retort pouches in the United States is growing at a rate of 13 to 15 percent each year, "with new products coming on board all the time." The popularity of the pouch is such that The Packaging Group held a Retort Pouch/Tray conference on April 12 through 14. "We discussed the entire supply chain of the retort pouch, from purchasing and materials to contract packaging," Sacharow says. "It's the only dedicated retort pouch program in the world."

Meat market inroads

Tyson Foods, Springdale, AR, currently offers a 7-ounce retort pouch, containing large chunks of all-white-meat chicken. Steven Morris, director of corporate packaging design and research, says the features of the retort pouches include convenience and its easy-to-open nature, along with no preservatives and an extended shelf life.

While the canning throughput would be higher, he reports, "pouch thermalization is much shorter due to the reduction of the packing mass." The end result has been a success at retail. "Consumers, once trialed, embrace the pouch," Morris says.

Esskay Meats, a Smithfield subsidiary located in Baltimore, MD, introduced a creamed chipped beef product in a retort pouch five years ago. "I'm really pleased with the packaging. We thought that it might eat into our regular chipped beef sales, but it didn't," says Gary Truant, product manager. "It was all new business."

Truant says that the extended shelf life makes managing the product easier for him, and the convenience of the packaging appeals to Esskay's consumers. The company is expanding the line of retort pouch products this month to include barbecue pork, sausage gravy, and chili. "We're hoping that we're going to attract some new customers, because this will be in a different location from where you see a lot of the pork barbecue and that type of item," Truant notes. "This will be a peg item."

Making the transition

Versapack, Tuxedo Park, NY, has its own brand of retort pouches called the SCR® pouch, with a retort zipper from Zip Pack. It also has a sister company called United Packaging and Processing Systems that represents the Ferlo line of filling, sealing, and retort systems, manufactured in Spain. Anthony Catino, executive vice president of Versapack, says, "We have done this to address the need of manufacturers who want to go to a turnkey solution provider."

Catino says that many current products in the home meal replacement (HMR) market suffer from overpackaging. "The product is typically in a tray with a cardboard sleeve and a film lidding," he says. "Then inside is the roasted meat product inside a vacuum pouch. The packaging is way too much." He says that a single printed pouch can replace all the other packaging.

For companies looking to move from cans to pouches, Catino says the formulation of the product will have to change. "Foods or meal solutions will have to be re-formulated for taste and texture," he says. Water and salts are not lost in the retort cooking process, unlike other cooking methods. Also, because of the long shelf life, food extenders are not as necessary as they are in other foods.

Replacing cans

Expanding on the idea of retort pouches, Tetra Pak developed a retortable carton in the 1990s. The carton, which received USDA compliance in 2002, is marketed by Tetra Recart of Vernon Hills, IL. Tetra Recart partnered with Austin, MN-based Hormel Foods to provide the packaging for chili. Unlike Esskay, which launched a new product with its


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creamed chipped beef, Hormel used the carton to replace 15-ounce steel cans in its existing Hormel and Stagg brands of chili.

"From a convenience standpoint, it has an easy-open feature to it, with a perforated opening on top, and it's lightweight." Steve Hellenschmidt, general manager of Tetra Recart, says of the cartons. "From a retailers' standpoint, shelf density is a huge benefit. We can essentially fit three Tetra Recart packages in the same space that two fifteen-ounce #300 cans can fit in, so they've got a thirty-three percent minimum increase in shelf density.

"In addition to that," he adds, "you have a package where the brand is always facing the consumer head-on. It's got a very nice billboard effect."

Bossar USA, Sarasota, FL, a supplier of horizontal form fill seal pouch equipment, offers a line of machinery that can fill and seal pouches at speeds of 20 to 200 pouches per minute, depending on the size of the pouch. The company has machines at work with various food items around the world, including tuna and soup. One co-packer is using the Bossar machines for chicken and baby food.

Roger Stainton, president of Bossar, says that pouches are becoming competitive now from a price point of view. "For a company that's looking to get a product into a can or a pouch, they might prefer the pouch, not only for the marketing impact, but for the economics," he says. "The pouch is becoming less expensive than the tin can."

Stainton notes that for a company looking to move from canning its products to using retort pouches, there is an initial capitol investment, but there are advantages as well. "There are some savings on the materials. Also, you haven't got to worry about labeling, as it's all on one printed piece of film," he concludes. NP

Technology providers participating in this feature include:

- Bossar USA, phone (941) 351-3023, fax (941) 351-2690, e-mail bossar.us@bossar.com, or visit www.bossar.com
- Tetra Recart AB, phone (847) 955-6000, fax (847) 955-6500, or visit www.tetrapakusa.com
- Versapack/United Packaging & Processing Systems, phone (845) 667-5000/(845) 667-5005, fax (845) 667-5001/(845) 667-5006, or visit www.versapack.com or www.uppsi.com

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