

Wrapping up convenience

Convenience-focused foods keep processors on the lookout for new and better packaging

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by Bryan Salvage



When it comes to creating new or improved meat and poultry packaging, processors and packaging suppliers never rest on their oars. From improving food-safety features or extending shelf-life to developing eye-popping graphics and initiating sustainability features, projects to enhance product packaging continue moving full-speed ahead.

Springdale, Ark.-based Tyson Foods, for example, constantly revises existing packaging, be it graphic changes, material revisions or shape and technologies, says Steve Morris, director of corporate packaging innovation, research and development.

"For instance, depending upon the size, application, customer, consumer end-use or specific market needs, we may package the same product in several packaging modes [an example would be a stand-up pouch and folding carton]," he says.

New packaging can evolve due to new material capabilities, machinery upgrades or emerging functional technologies. "There are exciting, new packaging technologies we are researching that hold promise for improved microwave, dual-oven, extended shelf-life and easy-open/re-close function to name a few," Morris adds.

Some of Tyson's more recent packaging introductions are in retail, particularly its launch of the AnyTizers line of products in July 2007 [snacking/light meal] and Quesa Dippers (sauce plus product). Late last December, Tyson added QuesaDippers to its AnyTizers line of products. The new snacks combine flour tortillas, all-white chicken with taco or fajita seasoning and Monterey Jack cheese, all packaged with Zesty Garden or Cilantro Lime salsa packets. The snacks are packed in re-sealable packaging allowing for storage in the freezer to maintain freshness.

Tyson Foods has been practicing sustainable packaging for decades. Potential packaging materials and containers are reviewed on a regular basis to determine if they are a fit for the company's operations.

"Our Reduce, Reuse and Recycle policies have been in place since 1990," Morris says. "We strive to reduce material usage across the corporation. We reuse inter-company tote bins for WIP material transport and processing and we recycle large quantities of corrugated containerboard and flexible plastics generated by incoming shipments and further processing. A conscious awareness of sustainability attributes and material conservation has become second nature for us. We continually look for ways to eliminate mass out of our packaging, reduce the number of components used and to consolidate the number of different types of materials used."

Fressure launch

Earlier this year, Cargill's new Fressure ground-beef patties were launched and tout many features including double the shelf-life (21 to 42 days) of traditional fresh burgers, enhanced food safety and delivering a consistent eating experience for consumers. Cargill is employing a patent-pending process technology to produce fresh ground-beef patties for the foodservice market. Product is treated by Milwaukee-based American Pasteurization Company (APC), a pioneer in the United States offering high-pressure processing (HPP) on a tolling basis. Packages undergoing the HPP process must withstand the pressure of this effective process.

This past March, Oshkosh, Wis.-based Curwood launched its FreshCase packaging. FreshCase is engineered to maintain fresh red color in vacuum packages. For retailers, the hermetic packaging offers a shelf-life of more than 30 days for whole-

muscle beef and extends typical retail display life up to 28 days compared to three to five days for tray overwraps. This advancement leads to significant cost savings from reduced markdowns, spoilage, waste and labor costs for repackaging.

FreshCase vacuum packages use up to 75 percent less packaging material than MAP packages, the company says. By eliminating MAP gases, this packaging can nearly double the amount of meat transported per truck.

Developed for fresh beef, FreshCase materials are available for many formats including forming and non-forming films, vacuum skin packaging, trays and semi-rigid films with VSP and ground beef chubs.

In June, Gold'n Plump launched a new line of Seasoned Boneless Skinless Chicken Breast Fillets. Each 24-oz. package containing four, 6-oz. breast fillets. Distribution began to regional and national retailers in early May.

Each fillet is vacuum-sealed and individually wrapped in single-portion sized packages for easy storage in the refrigerator and freezer. Product is available in Lemon Pepper, Original, Butter & Herb and Tomato Basil.

"We're excited about these new products, because our panel of consumers helped shape both the type of packaging and the flavors we created, so we know we've developed something that's on-target with what consumers are looking for," said Terra Nothnagel, product manager for GNP Company, the company behind the Gold'n Plump brand.

Not all packaging innovations are retail-oriented. In mid-July, Greenfield Farms Food Inc., Oakboro, NC, launched portion-control packaging for foodservice applications. The company will begin packaging premium steaks that have been cut to exact thickness and weights.

"This type of packaging for foodservice application helps to reduce cost by eliminating waste from the trimming process at the restaurants thereby increasing profitability for our customers," says Larry Moore, president and CEO.

Addressing malfunctions

Although meat and poultry packaging continues to improve and evolve, work also continues to stop packaging malfunctions. The most common in processed meats are faulty convenience features, such as easy-open and recloseability – primarily in private-label products, says Huston Keith, principal of Keymark Associates, Marietta, Ga. "I would attribute such malfunctions to the fact they're adding the feature more as a 'necessary evil' to be competitive," he says. "Such features on major brands seem to work reasonably well, but even then I will sometimes find an easy-peel feature that may not be so easy unless you're Arnold Schwarzenegger. When you have a hard time opening a zipper package, the zipper sometimes comes loose, which renders it basically useless."

In fresh meat, leakers remain problematic, although much progress has been made in recent years.

"This progress is due to better seals on the film and some equipment modifications that yield a better seal," Keith says.

The style of the package can be challenging, he adds. "Overwrap packaging can sometimes exhibit little channel leakers in wrinkles and folds that can allow the film to leak," he says.

Expect downgauging packaging materials and components to continue. "Downgauging has gone on since Nicholas Appert, the father of canning, first provided canned food for the French Army," Keith says.

Looking ahead, Keith feels opportunities exist to make things work better regarding leak-proof packaging, recloseability and other convenience features, as well as to lower the costs of these features so they can be used in a broader variety of packages.