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More Ready-to-Zap Foods Showing Up in the Freezer Case



By TIMOTHY W. MARTIN

Stacked inside supermarket freezers alongside the predictable fish sticks and chicken pot pies are dishes like gluten-free flatbread pizza, Indian curry and mushroom-based vegetarian "chicken."

Frozen food, enjoying a prolonged sales boom, is branching out. Many grocers are making more space for gourmet and specialized foods from companies like Boston Market Corp. and ConAgra Foods Inc. that are expanding their offerings. Moreover, better freezing techniques allow foods to stay fresher and retain more nutrients. And new types of packaging, such as microwave "crisping trays" that keep panini from getting soggy, help make taste and texture more like freshly prepared food.

As a result, sales of frozen entrées and side dishes are booming. In a year when supermarkets aggressively cut prices and battled with deflation, frozen-food sales grew 3.1% to \$40.5 billion for the 52 weeks ended Jan. 23, according to Nielsen Co. That was more than four times the 0.7% rate of growth for total food sales.

Consumers have been hitting the freezer case more often for the past five years or so, but the recession accelerated interest, say retailers, food companies and industry executives. Wal-Mart Stores Inc., the largest U.S. food retailer, has shifted more of its frozen food mix to include pizzas and has enlarged its selection of frozen private-label products, a spokeswoman says.

Dawn Bird of Forest Hill, Calif., used to eat only fresh salmon and halibut. But last year, as commissions from her bank-equipment sales job shrank, the 40-year-old started buying frozen fish to economize. She says the taste is about the same and because she doesn't have to eat everything all at once, she ends up throwing away less of it. "There's no spoilage," Ms. Bird says.

Frozen food has been around since the 1930s but didn't gain broader acceptance until after World War II, when TV dinners and fish sticks hit the market. The earliest TV dinners were packaged in silver foil trays and included hand-scooped portions of turkey, corn-bread dressing with gray, buttered peas and sweet potatoes. The meals came in packaging designed to look like a television. Until recently, most consumers were willing to sacrifice something for faster preparation time, says Frank Dell, a supermarket consultant from Stamford, Conn. "Now people won't tolerate bad taste," he says.

Gregory Ng, a marketing agency creative director from Cary, N.C., has posted more than 300 reviews of frozen foods on his Web site, freezerburns.com, in the past year and a half. Mr. Ng, 34, says he's noticed the crop of new products is catering to the health-conscious lunch crowd and bagged skillet meals intended for family-style meals.

Mr. Ng, married with three children, says for dinner the family will eat low-fat, low-sodium fish nuggets made by Henry & Lisa's Natural Seafood, owned by EcoFish Inc.

"They're changing the perception of what a fish stick should be," says Mr. Ng, who goes by the nickname, "The Frozen Food Master."

Many of the food companies are developing "center of the plate" entrées, such as a grilled chicken with mesquite barbecue sauce or turkey breast medallions sold frozen by Boston Market in a manufacturing partnership with H.J. Heinz Co.

"It's the entrée that people feel is the tougher challenge to prepare," says Boston Market Chief Executive Lane Cardwell about the company's decision to halve the number of side dishes.

Supervalu Inc., operator of Jewel, Albertson's and Shaw's, in January unveiled 20 new items, mostly frozen entrées, such as chicken alfredo fettucine and a five-cheese lasagna as part of its Culinary Circle product line. Sales for Culinary Circle doubled over the previous year, says Andrew Abraham, who heads Supervalu's private-label program.

"I would love to find a frozen version of my wife's veal scaloppini with balsamic vinegar and angel-hair pasta that tasted as good as hers without all the work," Mr. Abraham says. "I have yet to find it in any restaurant, either."