

Convenient to prepare, convenient to serve

Ready-to-eat meals are hot sellers



Fast, convenient and tasty – there's no doubt about it: Snacks and ready-to-eat (RTE) meals are right in line with the trend. Because consumers are spending less and less time fussing with pots and pans today. Fried fish dishes, exotic soups, hearty au gratin potatoes, Asian noodle snacks – the selection is enormous. Both ethnic food fans and lovers of hearty meat and potato dishes will have no trouble finding their "fast meals."

But it's not just today's stressed-out working men and women who are increasingly reaching for instant or frozen products; ready-to-eat meals have also won a firm place in the kitchens of the elderly and singles. Food retailers currently offer a selection of some 700 different frozen products, plus any number of RTE dishes that can be delivered right to the consumer's doorstep.

Deritualizing the act of eating

Nor is the trend toward ready-to-eat meals restricted to specific countries or forms of society. It's just as likely to find packaged soups being prepared in a Himalayan village as in a German or Mexican household. But what's driving this trend? The general wish for speed and convenience is also impacting the way we eat. People are spending less and less time on meals, and are often eating them alone at the table. One reason for this is the steadily growing number of single house-



holds, although meals frequently tend to be eaten alone in families, too, as the schedules of the individual family members often differ greatly. With a microwave, it's possible for everyone to satisfy their own needs on a "just in time" basis. Professionals also speak of a "deritualization" of eating in connection with this development.

High quality expectations

Responding to this change in eating patterns, in recent decades nutritional science has increasingly been coming to grips with a concept that has set new standards and con-



fronted the food and beverage industry with the problem of adapting to a new dimension: Catering. And it isn't just institutional kitchens in hospitals and factories, hotels and restaurants that are profiting from this steadily evolving technology – personal households are also reaping the benefits.

The quality standards that are employed in producing RTE dishes are very high: Not only do the raw materials and ingredients have to satisfy specific requirements with respect to grades and quality, the appearance and taste of the finished product, too, are crucial. To satisfy these needs, nutritional physiologists, scientists and practitioners from the food industry are today typically also involved in the development of new products.

From initial sample to finished product

The mission of the flavor industry is to lend an especially tasty note to these products. And close collaboration in a spirit of trust between producer and suppliers during all phases of the product development process is of paramount importance in this connection. Before the proposed seasonings are developed, companies like Haarmann & Reimer scrutinize the composition of the ready-to-eat meal and then create an initial sample of the finished product.



During the next phase, experts deal with the issue of how to preserve and stabilize the product. Among other things, a variety of intensive trials are conducted for this purpose, followed by bacterial inspections. And then it's up to the flavor industry – taking all of the values that have been determined into consideration – to develop the optimal seasoning. Once all of the preliminary trials have been concluded, the details are stipulated. Sequence and procedure are then tried out in a larger batch and defined in a provisional recipe. During a broad-based, so-called organoleptic test (testing a food for taste, aroma, etc.), both professionals and non-professionals make their assessments. If these findings are positive, production moves from

a pilot-plant scale to the industrial environment. Now it's a matter of setting up a suitable production line that conforms to the defined quality standards, producing the required wholesale samples on the basis of the concept that has been developed and determining optimum values for costing purposes.

Once the customer has given his O.K., mass production can commence. Since the wholesale samples are a firm constituent of the supply agreement, each package of product has to conform to the submitted representative sample with respect to properties, composition and organoleptic findings. It's a task that's much easier to solve if producer and supplier join forces and work together on the basis of mutual trust.