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# They'll Take It To Go!

**Prepackaged convenience food may just be more relevant than ever thanks to post-pandemic shifts in consumer mindsets, routines and needs**

*By Emily Cambriello, Contributing Editor*

**C**ONVENIENCE FOOD HOLDS an indispensable place in the lives of most consumers, whether in transit, at work, at play or at home. It's a go-to when time's tight for the speed and ease of procuring it, along with the effortless preparation and cleanup.

But the category took on a whole new level of prominence when the pandemic disrupted routines and mobility, forcing consumers to either cook more, take out or rely on convenience foods to replace trips to restaurants and grocery stores to minimize exposure to the virus. Prepackaged

foods in c-stores and supermarkets also became a go-to for the extra barrier of protection they provide from human touch.

Juggling at-home work demands, alongside kids' remote schooling for many, led to quarantine fatigue that put an extra premium on easily procured ready-to-eat meals that fit easily into busy days with the whole family to feed 24/7.

The pandemic also amplified consumers' focus on adopting a healthier lifestyle, a trend already years in the making driven by millennials. The same consumers who seek the convenience of quick, ready-to-eat meals don't want to sacrifice nutrition or quality ingredients, especially given their increased reliance on and frequent consumption of them.

Another COVID phenomenon that bodes well for the convenience services industry is that reduced onsite populations and social distancing spurred the closure of many onsite



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cafeterias and transition to prepackaged foods sold through vending machines and micro markets. This move enables on-demand feeding of a downsized workforce and can satisfy not only lunch and dinner, but also be an easy take-home dinner fix, eliminating the need to stop in transit.

With restrictions continuing to ease, today's consumers remain hyper-conditioned to get more done in less time when out and about in the COVID-19 era. Many are back to their pre-pandemic routines and looking for food that fits into their busy schedules and makes both their home and work lives easier. And vending and micro market operators and their suppliers are rising to the occasion.

**TRIED, TRUE AND NEW**

E.A. Sween Co., founded in 1955 and located in Eden Prairie, MN, has stood the test of time as a convenience food pioneer. It's a recognized name in vending and micro markets. Its signature Deli Express and Market Sandwich lines stay closely attuned to consumers' ever-changing preferences with a constant focus on quality and variety.

Newest to its lineup are premium breakfast sandwiches and other on-trend additions to the Market Sandwich line in response to consumer demand for more premium options.

Breakfast on the go has been a booming segment but declined sharply during COVID quarantine while many consumers stopped commuting to work. Technomic's May 2021 "The New State of C-Store Foodservice" report found that 57% of c-store retailers had reduced their number of breakfast



E.A. Sween

“Consumers are stopping during morning hours to grab breakfast items but also picking up lunch options.”  
**Melissa Hanson, E.A. Sween**

items as a result, but 75% said they expect to increase item counts in the coming year.

Convenience service operators can meet the anticipated upswing in demand with E.A. Sween's new upscale Market Sandwich breakfast line. Packaged with a clear window to showcase the product, they are microwave and warmer safe. Top sellers include 6-oz. omelet with ham and cheese on a croissant and 6.3-oz. sausage and jalapeno bacon with egg and cheese on a biscuit.

Also new to the Market Sandwich lineup are artisan-style flat sandwiches, formulated with less bread and more flavor. All have a 21-day shelf life.

“At the beginning of the pandemic, consumers spent a lot of time at home,” recalled E.A. Sween's Melissa Hanson. “Cooking at home for all meals

became the norm. As the pandemic progressed, they shifted to purchasing convenient prepared items and bringing them home for meals including ready-to-eat sandwiches that are safely made and packaged tightly. Prepackaging gives consumers confidence in their safety and freshness.” As restrictions have eased, consumers continue to look for “safely made” options, she added.

**BACK TO BUSINESS**

As consumers begin to move back to their offices and resume more routine schedules, E.A. Sween has seen ready-to-eat sandwich demand continue as consumers remain focused on limiting their number of stops. Purchasing food at their workplace vending machines and micro markets is a simple way to do so.

According to Hanson, “food as medicine” is a key theme stemming from the pandemic, with consumers seeking fare that is beneficial to their health, including less fried and processed food and products that are high in protein. In addition, purchase patterns increasingly center around breakfast options all day long.

“Consumers are stopping during morning hours to grab breakfast items but also picking up lunch options,” Hanson observed. “Concerns about COVID-19 are still real, and the fewer stops someone makes limits exposure to other people and the virus.”

**LABOR SHORTAGE DRIVES DEMAND**

Despite the growing popularity of breakfast on the go, the lack of labor



E.A. Sween

plaguing businesses of all kinds throughout the nation is making it hard for many convenience stores to keep their warmers filled during the peak morning demand. This is prompting many of them to offer options in the refrigerated area that consumers can heat and eat when they get to their destination.

“If c-store locations are struggling to keep the warmer filled, we advise ensuring there is enough in the refrigerated section and to offer point-of-sale signage to direct consumers to that area,” Hanson said.

This is even more reason for vending and micro market operators to be sure to include heat-and-eat breakfast items in their offerings to capture that business and provide the ultimate convenience by eliminating their customers’ need to stop on the way to work.

#### TARGET THEIR TASTES

“Geographically, wraps are big sellers on the West Coast, for example, while bagels are a top option on the East Coast,” Hanson noted. “Demo-

graphically, millennials and younger consumers seek options with flavor and spice and on-trend ingredients like sauces and spreads.”

Likewise, older generations and certain demographic groups simply want “all-American basics.” The bigger factor is the purchasing need state driving them to the store and if kids are present, Hanson observed.

E.A. Sween’s suggested retail prices range from \$2.99 to \$6.19. “Consumers want a good sandwich at a reasonable price,” Hanson commented. “In general, some groups are willing to pay more for healthy products. They understand healthier ingredients usually cost more.”

Supply chain disruptions have forced E.A. Sween, like other manufacturers, to raise its prices commensurate with raw material and logistic price increases. Given supply and raw material challenges, the company is pausing innovation to focus on its core items, which for now is plenty ample, diverse and innovative to live up to its commitment to serve consumers’ contemporary demands.

carrots. Each meal has no more than 430 calories, and no MSG, preservatives or sugar are added. Also in the development are keto-friendly and vegetarian options.

Launching in the heat of the pandemic proved to be strategic serendipity for the packaged food newcomer.

“People were afraid to go out and stand in queues to buy food. They preferred to have the option of where they could pick up multiple packages of ready-to-eat meals—frozen or otherwise—at a reasonable price,” recalled Jamaica Choice Foods’ Tony Bowen. “This presented an opportunity for us. There are no other manufacturers making our product and we knew how to make it well and how to make it cost effective based on market conditions. All they need is a microwave and they are able to enjoy a delicious, smart-portioned meal.”

Jamaica Choice Foods bills its fare as restaurant quality and commands a retail price of \$12 for its chicken entrees and \$16 for its goat and oxtail product which has higher ingredient costs.

“Our experience is that there are different types of consumers. There are people who will buy the product just because it’s new and they have not had the option available to them before,” Bowen instanced. “Then there are the customers who will like the fact that our food contains less calories and ingredients that would be more detrimental to their health. And finally, there’s the customer that is looking for a bargain on all their food purchases. We feel like we check all the boxes, and our consumer will gravitate to the product because they are getting value for their money.”

#### SUPPLY CHAIN WOES

That value is relative not only compared with more typical convenience fare, but also in a post-COVID world with supply chain issues that have

#### SPICING IT UP

Lynbrook, NY-based Jamaica Choice Foods LLC entered the convenience food arena in May 2020 to fill a void that its founder saw for restaurant-quality convenient ethnic foods with big, bold taste that also fit the bill for healthier lifestyles.

Its NormDe line of classic Jamaican favorites includes 11.5-oz. Curried Chicken and Curried Goat with white rice and Brown Stewed Chicken and Oxtail Stew with rice and peas. They come with a side of cabbage and



forced pricing higher. Bowen lamented that the cost of raw materials, lack of people in the workforce and rising cost of fuel have changed the marketplace for what most experts predict will be an extended period. Jamaica's Choice is doing everything in its power to hold its prices at their current level even as input costs continue to rise.

"We have taken steps to price the product based on smart portion sizes, using technical formulas to minimize our cost per unit," Bowen explained. "There is no 'off ramp' for the consumer. No matter which option they choose in terms of feeding themselves and their families, they will be faced with higher prices. There is a domino effect, and all sectors are affected by the actions of the other. Ultimately, someone will bear the burden of all this volatility and unfortunately that will be the consumer. We in the industry must figure out how to keep our costs down or unchanged for the consumer. This is a monumental task for some versus others, but it's critically important to making it through this economic quicksand and coming out intact on the other side when things start to stabilize."

Despite these challenges, Bowen expressed his confidence that Jamaica Choice Foods anticipates an upward growth trajectory for its products since it serves consumers in niche markets with unique cuisine in terms of both taste and nutrition that they can purchase in small or large quantities as needed.

"We know where our central customers are located but our food crosses ethnic and racial geographic lines, so we anticipate growth across all demographics," he predicted.

#### NATURAL CHOICE

Fruit stands in a category all its own with enduring and universal appeal. With limited mobility and a heightened focus on health throughout the



Healthier snacking options have always been a top concern for consumers, but the definition of 'healthy' has continued to evolve."

Earl Williams, Dole



Dole

pandemic, demand ramped up for it in a shelf-stable, packaged format.

Dole Packaged Foods, based in West Lake Village, CA, has cornered the market on delivering fruit as a healthy meal or convenient snack in vending and micro markets as those lines continue to blur for on-the-go consumers.

Individually sealed for safety and convenience are 4-oz. Dole Fruit Bowls in 100% Fruit Juice; 7-oz. Fruit Bowls in 100% Fruit Juice; and 7-oz. Fruit in Gel.

"Healthier snacking options have always been a top concern for consumers, but the definition of 'healthy' has continued to evolve," according to Dole's Earl Williams. "We are seeing a focus on functional benefits of foods as an influence for snacking choices." He cited a 2020 report from Statista that found 84% of consumers are more likely to buy snacks rich in vitamins and minerals.

"To expand on the changing definitions of healthy, we have seen it is not only about function but about quality ingredients," Williams added. "Products that are free of artificial ingredients including dyes and artificial sweeteners are becoming a priority when choosing snacks."

Additionally, Dole has seen demand for individually sealed grab-

and-go products skyrocket, which Williams attributed to safety and sanitation concerns amplified by the pandemic.

#### DOWN UNDER FAVORITE

Patties Foods' iconic Four'N Twenty brand of savory beef pies are steeped deeply in Australian culture and burst onto the U.S. scene in 2017 in convenience stores and at stadiums. Its U.S. presence continues to expand, with vending and micro markets in Patties' crosshairs.

Since its U.S. debut, the flaky pastry filled with 100% Australian beef and gravy has been available in single-serve 5.6-oz. Traveller format, which retails between \$3.49 and \$3.69. The Four'N Twenty Slider, popular Down Under, will soon be making its way to U.S. consumers, in a bite-size format.

"Consumers tell us this is good value for a product made with 100% Australian beef which is a good source of protein," said Patties Foods' Jonathan Harnish.

#### CHANNEL FOLLOWING

Four'N Twenty Traveller Beef & Cheese meat pies have reportedly proven a hit where they got their U.S. start in Rutter's convenience stores in Pennsylvania, Maryland and West Virginia. They're merchandised in self-serve hot hold cabinets offering a

meal or snack for consumers on the go throughout the day. Peak sales are at lunchtime, with a growing fan base reporting that they prize them as a filling and tasty comfort food, according to Harnish.

“While there is a skew toward males aged 18 to 45, and people who routinely purchase through the c-store channel such as day workers, truck drivers, etc., our product is still consumed regularly across all geographic areas where it is available for purchase as it is a comfort food that can be eaten one handed.”

CSP Daily News further validated Four’N Twenty’s growing popularity stateside with consumers ranking the Beef & Cheese Traveller eighth among its short list of America’s “30 Must-Try Sandwiches for 2020,” alongside established brands such as 7Eleven and McDonald’s.

Another key partner instrumental to Patties’ U.S. launch and growing fan base is the Philadelphia 76ers. The basketball team sells the meat pies during home games at Wells Fargo Arena. This is no small feat in the land where the legendary Philadelphia cheesesteak has a cult following and is the typical game meal of choice.

### PREPACKAGED PREFERENCE

“C-stores increased their reliance on pre-packaged foods that limited con-



The Four’N Twenty flagship beef and cheese pastry easily competes with a Philly cheesesteak sandwich.

Patties Foods

“

As restrictions ease, we are starting to see a return to normality in sales across c-store sectors and some restaurant categories, with sales rates showing strong growth for our products.”

**Patties Foods’ Jonathan Harnish.**

tamination exposure and staples like self-serve roller grills took a significant hit due to the risk of COVID contamination that they posed,” said Patties Foods’ Harnish.

Many of these changes have continued to impact where consumers purchase key products and individually packaged food items have maintained strong consumer favor for safety reasons, he added.

“As restrictions ease, we are starting to see a return to normality in

sales across c-store sectors and some restaurant categories, with sales rates showing strong growth for our products,” Harnish commented. “Coffee sales are a significant indicator that the market is recovering, as sale volumes are approaching – and in some cases exceeding – pre-pandemic levels. We gained this insight from industry associates who have indicated that ancillary coffee products are also experiencing a sales boost.”

Launched in 1947 in Australia, Four’N Twenty pies grew to become a national phenomenon synonymous with “the footy” (Australian rules football) and the ritual of the game in stadiums across the country. Patties Foods, which began in 1966, purchased the “Four’N Twenty” brand in 2003. It continues to innovate the “Four’N Twenty” brand to keep up with consumer trends and reflect the diversity of its consumers.

### TEST OF TIME

Tyson Foods, founded in 1935 and headquartered in Springdale, AR, is another longtime convenience food leader tuned into meeting the ever-evolving needs of consumers in a world that is everything but constant.

“Pre-packaged and on-the-go snacking have been noticeable both during and post-pandemic,” according to Tyson Foodservice’s Tim Klinedinst, who heads up channel development of lodging and vending. “We are seeing more contactless micro markets which suggests these types of items



Tyson Foodservice

are going to continue to be important to the operator and consumer. Even though the world is reopening, there is definitely a new normal.”

Klinedinst also pointed out that in commercial foodservice, pickup and delivery is still up over table and counter service, according to NPD Crest data, which points to an opportunity for convenience service operators who serve consumers on the go.

Tyson Foodservice has a vast portfolio of products for vending and micro markets including sandwiches, burgers, prepackaged snacks and handheld items.

Among its on-trend offerings, with upscale appeal and trusted national brand recognition, is its Hillshire Farm Flatbread Sandwich line, which includes 9.2-oz. Cold Cut Combo and 8.6-oz. Italian Combo and Turkey Bacon Club. Clear, hand-wrapped packaging showcases the premium, fresh-from-the-deli-style quality ingredients inside.

White Castle’s iconic hamburgers have been a fixture in vending since 1987 when its retail division was formed. Available for vending and micro markets in convenient micro-wavable 2-packs are 3.16-oz. Classic Cheese Sliders made with 100% beef, American cheese and grilled onions; 5.22-oz. Chicken Breast and 5.68-oz. Chicken Breast with Cheese made with all white meat; and 5.36-oz. Sausage, Egg and Cheese sliders with sausage patty, whole egg and American Cheese. All are served on its signature bun and contain 9g to 22g of protein per serving. Prices range from \$2.50 to \$3.25.

“We have learned over the years that great taste and convenience are essential for consumers, and that value perceptions are based on more than just price alone,” said White Castle’s Jamie Richardson.

He emphasized that the onset of the pandemic had probably the most

pronounced impact on consumer behavior seen in the food business since rationing during World War II. Early on, the changes were most pronounced, because typical patterns of going to work and commuting were turned upside down.

#### LOYAL FANS AND NEWCOMERS

“Consumer freezers became fortification zones, where meals were stocked and stored to withstand the siege. Meanwhile – our front-line manufacturing workers everywhere were making it happen every day – and grateful they could source Sliders from their vending machines at work – whatever shift they might be on – a consolation and source of comfort in spite of uncertain times,” he recalled. “We do know many people tried White Castle for the first time ever. And based on their experience, they have gone from non-users to fans, so that makes us happy that we’ve been able to be there for so many when they have craved us most.”



As White Castle navigates the next phase, one thing for certain is that things that mattered most before the pandemic still matter most now, according to Richardson.

“People want hot and tasty food, and they also crave convenience,” he stated. “Being able to share food that not only sates physical hunger but also feeds the soul is a definite plus, and we feel fortunate, because that’s why we exist and what we do best.”

#### WHAT’S NEXT?

Food makers everywhere are going to continue to stay focused on what’s next – what’s temporary, and what’s lasting, according to Richardson.

White Castle reaps the benefit of being an iconic fast-food brand with distinctive taste and unique properties that make it an ideal snack or a meal, which transcends all generations.

“From a demographic perspective, in addition to our base of loyalists, we’ve seen growing interest from consumers of the future – especially Gen Z and millennials,” he said.

Like most food manufacturers, White Castle is grappling with supply chain challenges but sees a light at the end of the tunnel.

“We remain hopeful that as vaccination rates rise, and adjustments continue to be made regarding supply chain that we return to a world that’s more predictive and less pressured,” Richardson said. “As a family-owned business, we consistently monitor all our costs, evaluate pricing, and take a

long view that focuses on making sure we continue to represent value to our customers everywhere.”

As consumers continue to return to their busy routines outside of their homes and are more strapped for time, convenient, quick bites will be in high demand. Safety will also continue to be a top priority giving individually wrapped foods a sales boost as consumers gear back toward a new normal. ■