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Lunch Gets a Makeover

Whether it's microwavable bowls or replacement snacking, mid-day meals are changing, but there are opportunities to provide portable, convenient, even grab-and-go items that are not only tasty but healthy.

By Lauren R. Hartman, Product Development Editor

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What happened to lunch? Convenient meals are becoming necessities for consumers juggling busy lives with work and family, and people are abandoning traditional meal times and rituals. A lot of that has affected lunch.

A study from human resource consulting firm Robert Half/OfficeTeam (www.roberthalf.com) found nearly half of workers either don't take lunch breaks or take breaks that last 30 minutes or less. Many workers multitask while they eat. Research from Right Management (www.right.com) shows the lunch break is somewhat disappearing, and that only one in five people steps away for a mid-day meal, while most workers eat at their desks.

Alas, 55 percent of lunch meals are solitary, where quick and easy are priorities, as a result of changing lifestyles and growth of single-person households, notes research firm NPD Group (www.npd.com). Technology has affected the traditional lunch hour; it's easier to keep typing while we eat, so we're free to do so.

"Consumers eat around their schedules rather than schedule around mealtimes," observes Blaine Becker, senior marketing director at the Hartman Group (www.hartman-group.com). "Lunch is often scheduled to accommodate an overflow of meetings and must-do's."

Becker says while dinner remains an important social meal occasion, breakfast and lunch are routinely "snackified," especially during the work week. "This opens up schedules and frees up time from planning, cooking and cleaning. On these no-cook occasions, consumers are eating a mix of packaged and prepared foods (yogurt cups, sushi, deli sandwiches) with some fresh ingredients, such as snacking fruit or salad bar items. Or they may outsource these low-stakes occasions to restaurants and foodservice. Eating out isn't just for special occasions but an everyday approach to 'getting food.'"

While sandwiches remain the most popular selection (just visit any Panera Bread restaurant), salads with fresh fruit and vegetables are gaining. Taste, health, price and speed are prime considerations at lunchtime. Nielsen (www.nielsen.com) recently revealed 64 percent of consumers are making a concerted effort to buy healthier foods for the meals they do eat.

If fresh fruit isn't available, Fruit Refreshers from Del Monte (www.delmonte.com) offer adults a fruit cup with a "grown-up" portion size (7 oz.) and sophisticated varieties. The line includes Pineapple, Grapefruit & Oranges and Mandarin Oranges in flavored, slightly sweetened fruit water. The product contains no high-fructose corn syrup,

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– Steve Sklar, Boulder Canyon
Authentic Foods



artificial flavors, sweeteners or GMOs, and the cups contain no BPA.

Riviana Foods (www.riviana.com) put Minute Rice Ready to Serve Rice into single-serve microwavable cups for the noon meal. The company cites consumer preferences for healthier, globally inspired foods in introducing Brown Rice & Quinoa and globally inspired Basmati Rice, both ready in 60 seconds. The varieties also come in family-size bowls serving three to four that are microwave-ready in two minutes.

Similarly, McCormick & Co.'s Zatarains recently introduced rice cups that "bring you the flavor of New Orleans in just 3 1/2 minutes." Just add water and microwave and you can have Jambalaya, Red Beans & Rice, Black Beans & Rice or Dirty Rice for lunch, without a trip to the French Quarter.



Speaking of rice, low-carb dieters are substituting cauliflower for rice in many dishes, and ricing it is a trendy way to slip in more veggie servings. B&G Foods (www.bgfoods.com) hopes the cauliflower-rice trend can help Green Giant update its image and reverse declining sales. Green Giant plans to start selling bags of frozen "Riced Veggies" made with cauliflower, as well as frozen "mashed cauliflower" at the end of September.

Trader Joe's and Wegmans are in on the trend too with house brands, and Boulder Canyon is moving from snacks to seasoned and plain frozen varieties of microwave-ready, grain-free riced cauliflower, carrots, broccoli with sweet potato. "Vegetable ricing is a huge trend right now," said Steve Sklar, senior vice president and general manager for Boulder Canyon Authentic Foods. "We've taken it a step further to provide seasoned and plain varieties so [consumers] have multiple options."

Kraft Heinz' new Devour Meals (www.devour-foods.com) are also packed with protein. The microwavable meals cater to the lunch crowd with a whopping dozen savory varieties that are ready quickly and designed to satisfy taste cravings, the company says. The meals include what Kraft Heinz calls "upgraded classics," such as White Cheddar Mac & Cheese with Bacon, Angus Beef with Cornbread and Cheese Ravioli with Sun-Dried Tomato Cream Sauce. There's even sweet Chicken & Waffles and Deep Dish Honey BBQ Chicken Pizza.





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An innovative deli case option is the Perfect Fit Meals (perfectfitmeals.com) line, "ready-to-eat meals [that] are hand crafted, portion-controlled, and dietitian designed for busy consumers who value the integrity of wholesome and healthy cooking." They come in microwavable, skin-pack trays from Cryovac (www.cryovac.com) that stay fresh for 35 days refrigerated by sealing out oxygen. High-pressure pasteurization allows them to be preservative- and additive-free. The BPA-free Simple Steps packs feature a unique self-venting system that allows the food to be reheated easily, while the vacuum process enhances merchandising appeal of the food. Varieties include a chicken fajita bowl with rice black beans and seasoned vegetables; coconut chicken with sugar snap peas, cilantro and basmati rice; and green chili turkey hash with black beans, corn and sweet potatoes. Each has about 260 calories.

School lunches

USDA meal standards to improve the nutrition of school lunches also point to the broader trend in American food culture of fresher, healthier and higher-quality foods. Likewise, store brands are targeting back-to-school grocery buyers in different ways. An article on the Instant.ly's blog points out that big brands are reinventing classic lunchbox foods with fewer chemicals, less fat and overall healthier ingredients.

Campbell Soup Co. (www.campbells.com) for example, plans to launch a convenient, ready-to-serve soup line called Well Yes, revved up with ingredients such as quinoa, kale and lean proteins. Campbell says the move promotes the health benefits of the soup's grains and plant proteins.

Grocery shelves are trying to accommodate busier days with portable lunches and healthful choices that are quick and easy for parents and kids. General Mills' Yoplait had a hit with Go Gurt pouched yogurts, but the 2-oz. size, while ideal for small children, left teens and adults hungry. So new is Yoplait Go Big "rip & grip" yogurt pouches weighing in at 4 oz., which makes them a contender for a light lunch. The pouches, available in eight-packs, come in cherry and peach/mango combinations or mixed berry and strawberry varieties.

Hope Foods' (www.hopefoods.com) individual organic hummus cups in spicy avocado, original, fiery sriracha and bold Thai coconut curry are nutritious, flavorful dips or salad toppings to help kids eat more vegetables. Hope says its hummus is one of few national organic brands that uses HPP to avoid preservatives.

GLK Foods' Oh Snap! Pickling Co. (www.ohsnappickles.com) offers a fun way to enjoy portion-packed pickles, fresh pickled green beans (labeled Cool Beans) and carrots (labeled Carrot Cuties) in easy-open 1.75-oz. standup



pouches. Non-GMO and suitable for snacks and quick lunches, the refrigerated pickled veggies are a hit, says Ryan Downs, fourth-generation owner and president. "We have always looked to innovate and create new ways to do things. We saw that potential in pickles to go where no others have gone before, and our Oh Snap! brand is a result of that mindset."

Emerging channels for lunch are improving their offerings and becoming more accessible. "Retail store visits for prepared foods increased by double digits since 2008, and restaurant lunch visits have declined," states NPD's prepared foods market report. "Retail stores, like supermarkets, have advantages over restaurants, like the availability of healthy options, a good variety of foods, light offerings, affordability and one-stop convenience."

The traffic lull mid-day at restaurants also may be due to more convenience-store stops. Convenience stores, Technomic's latest data shows, are enjoying stable lunchtime patrons, and analysts predict C-stores to become more of a lunch destination over the next few years. More than a quarter (29 percent) of consumers said they'd purchase lunch from C-stores more often if the choices were higher in quality. So c-store formats are evolving, and featuring customizable formats.

AdvancePierre Foods (www.advancepierre.com), Cincinnati, maker of sandwiches and value-added proteins for

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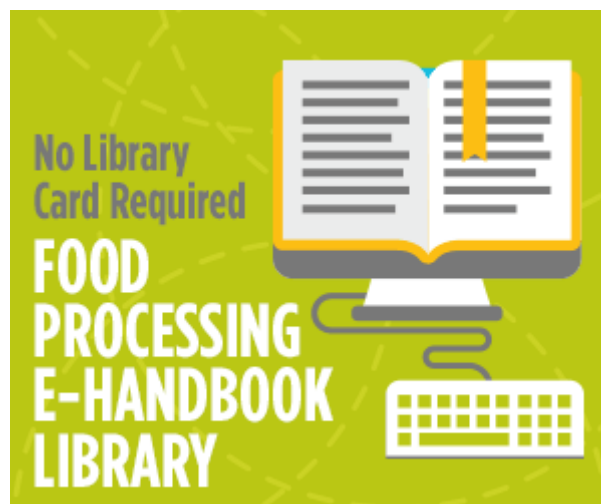
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