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Frozen Food Age

Updated: August 23rd, 2007 05:29 PM PDT



On the Rebound

Fresh-cut vegetables move forward after E. coli outbreak from spinach and lettuce in 2006.

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The fresh-cut vegetable category hasn't completely rebounded from the 2006 North American E. coli outbreak that frightened consumers nationwide. But progress continues.

Higher food safety standards, creative new blends and packaging innovation are giving consumers more reason to trust and shop for packaged refrigerated vegetables.

The initial outbreak occurred in September 2006 and involved fresh spinach. A subsequent outbreak, in November and December 2006, was initially attributed to green onions served by the Taco Bell and Taco John's restaurant chains, but later was determined to have been caused by prepackaged iceberg lettuce. All told, at least 276 consumer illnesses were attributed to the tainted produce.

"I think that the category is still rebounding from that," suggests Darci Eckermann, vice president of marketing and business development, Sholl Group II, Minneapolis, the marketer of the Green Giant Fresh brand. "A number of key competitors, especially those in the cut salad and tender leaf lines, are feeling the impact of that more. But the category as a whole is still rebounding. We lost consumer confidence, and I think that we, as a category, are beginning to rebuild and regain the confidence. But there hasn't been a complete rebound yet."

According to IRI, the Fresh Cut Salad category in the U.S. across supermarkets, drug stores, and mass merchandise outlets (excluding Wal-Mart) for the 52 weeks ending July 15, 2007, notched approximately \$2.7 billion, actually down 6.1% over the previous period. Among the leading lines were Fresh Express Fresh Cut Salad at under \$1.2 billion, up 3.8%; Dole Fresh Cut Salad at just under \$813 million, down 10.7%; and private label fresh-cut salad at slightly over \$311 million, an 8.3% decline.

There is no shortage of opportunity. A recent U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey shows that less than one-third of Americans are eating the recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables.

Innovation and Opportunity

Ready Pac Produce Inc., Irwindale, Calif., continues to be a major player in the segment, of course. Its European Style Salad Blends line includes premium blends of baby lettuces and crisp greens. Its Spinach Temptations line is available in four new varieties: Baby Spinach, Florentine Spinach Blend, Spinach Spring Mix and Zesty Baby Greens.

In May, another category player, San Juan Bautista, Calif.-based Earthbound Farm, America's largest grower and shipper of organic produce and specialty salads, expanded its line of specialty greens with new fresh cut salad choices and sizes. Among them: Baby Spinach, Baby Arugula and Mâche (mâche with frisée and radicchio) blends. They all carry a suggested retail price of \$3.99.

Packaging appears to have come to the forefront. Freshtables SteamPerfect is the first national brand to come to market with the proprietary steaming microwave bags in the United States," says Eckermann.

The Freshtables SteamPerfect line of fresh vegetables and fruits with chef-created sauces comes in unique steaming bags that steam the product in the microwave in just about two minutes. The bag has an invisible steaming valve that allows for pressure to build and safely release at the end of the cooking cycle. It is merchandised in produce sections (near the lettuce, carrots, and salads) of grocery stores. Eckermann believes the packaging will play "a more important role in innovation. If you think about where the most recent innovation has come from, it started with microwave packaging. Now we've moved to steaming packaging. It looks as though we are borrowing from some of our neighboring categories. If we continue to follow that process we will find packaging that will support other cooking methods." She believes that packaging is "going to be the key to providing the convenience that consumers are looking for. It (means) being able to deliver on freshness."

The Freshtables SteamPerfect varieties are available in 12 oz. packages in nine varieties, with the suggested retail price of \$3.99:

- Red Apples and Raisins with Cinnamon Sauce
- Broccoli and Baby Slim Carrots with Cheese Sauce
- Broccoli and Baby Slim Carrots with Garlic Butter
- Butternut Squash with Cinnamon Sauce
- Cauliflower with Cheese Sauce
- Vegetable Medley with Cheese Sauce
- Green Beans with Garlic Butter
- Sugar Snap Peas and Baby Slim Carrots with Southwest Sauce
- Baby Slim Carrots with Chive Butter

The new line kicked off distribution in late June. The first customer on board was Wal-Mart. Shipments went to stores in their southern and central distribution areas. "We will continue to focus on a regional expansion," says Eckermann, "and we will probably be national-our hope is-by May 2008."

She notes that "plenty of other cut vegetable items out there that come in some sort of steaming packaging, whether it's a tray or some other kind of bag. I think the big difference with ours is that we have flavored butter sauces." There are nine SKUs in all, and five sauces.

"There is, I believe, one other product on the market that has butter in its steaming cut vegetable line, but it's just plain butter," says Eckermann. Each package contains a "butter puck," and as the product steams in the microwave the butter melts, evenly coating the vegetables.

Glory and Brand

The tainted produce scare never really affected Glory Foods, Columbus, Ohio, because all of its cut vegetables are designed to be cooked, says Dino Allen, director of fresh.

"Once you get it to a certain temperature, anything that would linger on, of course, would burn off with the heat." Beyond that, he adds, "the next thing that came out of that was that a lot more individuals, retailers, growers and processors have stepped up their safety measures."

Glory's product line includes Collard Greens, Cut Sweet Potatoes, Kale Greens, Mustard Greens, Rutabaga, Southern Blend Greens (Collard, Mustard & Turnip), Turnip Greens, Turnip Root, Yellow Squash, Yellow Squash & Zucchini and, most recently, Cabbage.

Glory's newest item comes in a 16 oz. bag. "It's not shredded like a lot of the competition does for coleslaw," says Allen. "It is a quarter-cut cabbage." The product is available now in selected markets in the Virginia area, as well as parts of North and South Carolina.

"One thing that Glory Foods has always done is provide quick, convenient mealtime solutions for families," says Allen. "We like to make it very simple for the individual to simply add seasonings and start

cooking. We want to cut the normal preparation time down."

It is consumers who drive any category, says Allen. "I do feel that a lot of the retailers are doing the right thing by offering the correct product mix, the correct items. They are looking at their consumer base and saying to us, 'Hey, we don't have this; we think this would be a good mix of the items for our consumers.'" Glory's cut veggies line retails for two for \$5 in a lot of places, or \$2.79 to \$2.99.

First and foremost Glory Foods "always sells its brand," Allen says. "Whether it's canned, frozen or fresh we try to blend it all together as a working brand." The company uses consumer events, couponing, sampling and cross merchandising. I like cabbage with smoked sausage, for example, so we might look at some other cooking methods that can be used to prepare the cabbage."

Allen says many among the competition "are looking at what we have done and offering a lot of me-too items. We go where that consumer goes. We look at the things that are convenient and quality that we can put our name on and go from there. We get a lot of requests from a lot of retailers who say, "Why don't you try this, or why don't you try that."

The interest and passion for this category clearly remain intact.

REFRIGERATED NEW PRODUCTS

Kraft 'Says Cheese' With New Singles, Philly Fall Rollouts

Kraft Foods, Northfield, Ill., has reinvigorated an American classic with its new Kraft Singles Select American cheese.

Kraft says Singles Select is a "firmer, richer individually-wrapped American cheese slice with more flavorful taste. With a rich, deli taste, Singles Select can go hot or cold. It brings sophistication to a cold deli sandwich while still melting perfectly on a grilled cheese or burger."

Singles Select is available in 12 oz. and 16 oz. packages of 16 and 24 individually wrapped slices. Suggested retail prices start at \$3.59 for the 12 oz. package.

Kraft says Singles Select will roll out nationwide September and October and will be available in the refrigerated dairy section of grocery stores.

Also in September, Kraft will roll out Philadelphia Cracker Spreads. Kraft says the new spreads will "combine natural cheese with Philadelphia cream cheese and herbs and vegetables to create a bold, new taste for snacking with crackers."

Cracker Spreads will debut in four flavors: Asiago and Parmesan, Feta & Spinach, Pepperjack & Jalapeno, and White Cheddar & Red Pepper. SRP is \$2.49.

Bob Evans Brings Back 1950s Comfort Food Classic

Bob Evans Farms has brought the classic 1950s comfort food-the casserole-to the refrigerated foods section.

The Bob Evans Green Bean Casserole is just like "mom used to make," with fresh cut green beans with mushroom sauce and crunchy onion topping in a convenient microwaveable container.

The 14.5 oz. container holds three serving and carries a suggested retail price of \$3.89 to \$3.99.

"Green bean casserole is a favorite dish, but many people only have the time to prepare it for holidays and special occasions," says Mike Townsley, vice president of food products, Bob Evans Farms, Columbus, Ohio.

"With the Bob Evans Green Bean Casserole ready to take from your refrigerator to your dinner table in less than five minutes, we're helping families make every day a special occasion."

Pillsbury Place 'n Bake Rolls 'Can Be Baked Anytime'

Pillsbury has perked up the refrigerated dough category with new Place 'n Bake Crescent Rounds.

"Crescent Rounds are so easy, consumers can bake them anytime," says Peg Ilkka, a spokeswoman for Pillsbury and General Mills, Minneapolis. "Simply open the refrigerated package, separate the formed rolls and place onto a baking tray for convenient, fresh-from-the-oven dinner rolls that are the perfect complement for family weekday meals.

"Light, flaky, warm and buttery, Place 'n Bake Crescent Rounds are as delightful as original crescents, but in a fun, more convenient new shape," Ilkka adds.

Place 'n Bake Crescent Rounds are available in an 8 oz. package of 8 rolls. Suggested retail price is \$2.39. The product is being rolled out nationally.

Snack Size Finlandia Package Shows Cheese, Spurs Trial

Responding to consumer demands for "snacking size" packaging, Finlandia Cheese Inc., Parsippany, N.J., has created a new size for its Oltermanni Baby Muenster cheese.

The new 8 oz. size replaces a 17 oz. size. The cylindrical packaging also features a clear top window so shoppers can see the cheese's texture and color. "A delightfully smooth, full-flavored cheese, Oltermanni is one of Europe's favorite cheeses," says John Sottile, vice president and chief operating officer. "Its flavor is tangy yet gentle enough to be a family favorite."

Sottile says "consumers love trying new specialty cheeses. By reducing the package size, and at the same time, the product's price point, we are welcoming more trial of this truly remarkable cheese. Extensive consumer samplings of Oltermanni strongly support that cheese lovers are hooked after just one taste."

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