

# Convenience Packaging For Consumers

*Value-added packaging attracts harried shoppers and builds profits.*

BY TRISHA J. WOOLDRIDGE

Photo courtesy of NatureWorks LLC



## Produce packaging is a cyclical phenomenon.

First there was bulk. Then the pendulum swung to packages, heralded as the wave of the future. But as customers began to complain about spoilage and lesser quality, the industry switched to more bulk displays. Now the pendulum is swinging yet again.

Enhanced packaging technology and a growing demand for convenience are the impetus behind the comeback of packaged produce. Since any type of advance can result in higher price points and because there is a finite amount of shelf space, experts stress the importance of balancing the retail

desire to offer new products with space availability and customer willingness to pay premium prices.

For now, consumer response to more convenient packaging options is positive.

"Consumers are getting more used to buying packaged produce than they were about 15 years ago," explains Chip Venable, eastern regional sales manager for agricultural packaging, Reynolds Packaging Corp., Richmond, VA. "It used to be everything was in bulk, but now they want packaging so they can just take it and go."

Mona Doyle, president of Consumer Network, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, agrees. "The interest in convenience is growing. The market is there, such as cooking produce in a bag or any way to make things user-friendly."

"It's part of the active lifestyle," says Bruce Knobloch, vice president of marketing for River Ranch Fresh Foods, LLC, Salinas, CA. "The time every consumer has is becoming more restricted."

Convenience is extremely important to consumers, according to Carol Zweep, manager of packaging services for Guelph Food Technology Centre, Guelph, ON, Canada. As they demand healthier choices in convenient packaging, she believes, "the evolving of packaging helps everything."

Microwavable steamed products are good examples of this trend, according to Lorri Koster, spokesperson for Mann Packaging Company, Inc., Salinas, CA. "Consumer response has been overwhelming. These are healthful side dishes that provide quick and easy meal solutions."

Another focus of contemporary packaging is portion control. Packaging the appropriate sizes for smaller families and individuals





adds value to produce offerings. Demand for single servings that can be eaten at work or even in the car is growing, notes Consumer Network's Doyle.

"The demographic is changing to smaller units," explains Kevin Stanger, vice president of sales and marketing for Wada Farms Potatoes, Idaho Falls, ID. "You've got a lot of single or retired customers or working couples. They want something easy and just enough for one or two people."

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JBJ Distributors, based in Fullerton, CA, recently rolled out a line of 8-ounce packages of vegetables that can be microwaved, steamed or boiled, notes Alex Dupré, director of fresh-cut produce. The line includes squash, beans, white sweet potatoes, golden beets and a variety of seasonal items. "The 8-ounce size is a good portion for one person or it can be shared between two people," he explains. "It all comes down to improving the preparation time, especially for working couples."

Kurt Zuhlke and Associates, Inc., Bangor, PA, offers microwaveable corn trays for two and three ears of corn. The company hopes

to introduce a four pack in the near future.

"It steams inside through the microwave," Zuhlke says. "And it holds in the nutritional value and flavor."

Reynolds offers an array of packaging size options, Venable says. "In the smaller sizes, they come very small, such as a half pint of produce. You can put them in convenience stores or offer them as a snack pack."

On the other hand, with the growth of club stores, larger bulk packaging of up to four pounds is being requested. "What's interesting is that this is all coming from consumer requests," Stanger adds.

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# Sustainable Convenience

**M**ore and more consumers are demanding ecologically friendly plastics and a sustainable plastics source rather than traditional petroleum-based plastics.

“Every marketer, grower, shipper and processor has an ear and eye on the green movement, so to speak,”

says Bruce Knobloch, vice president of marketing, River Ranch Fresh Foods, LLC, Salinas, CA. “It’s a balance of technology, cost, and making sure everything we do has green alternatives.”

World Wide Plastics, headquartered in Springfield, MA, is making an effort to keep this balance, says Joel Kaufman. World Wide plans to reopen as a new company, called Nature’s Fresh, which will specialize in organic fiber trays made from sugar cane. The film wrapping around the trays will be organic, and the trays themselves will be U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) approved as 100 percent organic.

“They are 100 percent biodegradable, compostable and organic,” he explains. “The trays look every bit as nice as what people are using now — actually, they may even look nicer. We can do almost any kind of tray and it can be done in colors, as well.”

Available in October, the trays and film are also oil-resistant, water-resistant and can be placed in a microwave or an oven.

Minnetonka, MN-based NatureWorks LLC, manufacturer of PLA made from 100 percent plant material, is one of the leaders in the area of ecologically-friendly packaging materials. PLA is made from fermented corn sugar. “We go from plant to plastic, using a 100 percent annually renewable resource,” according to David Stanton, NatureWorks brand manager. “We have a life-cycle assessment and we want to make



Photos courtesy of NatureWorks LLC

a better environmental footprint.”

NatureWorks interacts with its clients to show them how high-quality packaging can make a better overall product. “Now, you can talk about how good the produce is, but take it a step further and market the container as well,” Stanton suggests. “You can make a commodity a point of differentiation in produce.”

NatureWorks offers three different ways to market its packaging. There is the emotional component of giving back to nature and being good for the environment. The performance component demonstrates how consumers can be eco-friendly without having to give up anything; virtually no consumers can differentiate a NatureWorks package from a regular package. A statistical component, including a benefits calculator of how much greenhouse gas is prevented and how much fossil fuel is saved, is also available. “A challenge is how much info you can convey on the label,” Stanton explains. “You won’t be able to just look at it and know it’s green. Because the plastic looks so similar, it must tell a story.” **pb**

## SELLING QUICK COOKING

Even more important than offering a variety of sizes is offering an array of preparation options. Being able to prepare a side dish of fresh vegetables right in the package is a major draw for consumers, and the industry has answered the need by creating produce packages that can be steamed in the microwave.



Photo courtesy of Wada Farms

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"It all boils down to time," says Jeanne Clark, market manager for Pactiv Corp., City of Industry, CA. "People want to eat better, but they don't always have the time to prepare healthful meals. Fresh vegetables in microwavable packaging gives consumers the option of eating healthfully without all the preparation time."

In addition to kits that combine protein and starch products with produce items, Clark lists asparagus, artichokes and green beans as commodities selling well in microwavable bags.

For example, in early October Mann



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introduced a traditional fresh-cut vegetable line with a steam-in bag feature. "The packaging was always microwavable, but a new sealing technique provides a pressure point so the bag is a true steamer," Koster notes. "We also offer a Ready, Set, Steam line, which features fresh vegetables in a steamer tray with a sauce component. The sauce is in a separate pouch under the tray."

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According to Sarah Wangler, marketing manager for Sholl Group II, Inc., Eden Prairie, MN, Green Giant Fresh products include a variety of cut vegetables in microwavable bags. The brand also offers sweet potatoes cubes and fries — sweet potatoes are one of the "trendiest" vegetables in restaurants and at retail, she notes.

The Freshtables brand takes produce to a new level with SteamPerfect pouches that include tucks of "chef-inspired sauces" that melt during the 2-minute cooking time.