

'Shelf-Stable' Foods Seek to Freshen Sales

By RICHARD GIBSON

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The "introductory special" at King Soopers grocery stores in Colorado Springs, Colo., sounds almost too good to pass up: savory pop-in-the-microwave dinners from Kraft General Foods that can be stored for months at room temperature, for just \$1.89 each.

That's \$1 under the regular suggested price. Still, Frank Romero, a King Soopers customer-service representative, doubts he'll buy any. "You're talking meat that stays on the shelf," he says. "Something just doesn't seem right about that."

Mr. Romero speaks for many shoppers. Shelf-stable meals, as they are known, have been around for years, but they remain a high-tech product in search of a market. Most U.S. consumers have at least one microwave oven, but fewer than 25% have tried shelf-stable dinners, according to industry estimates.

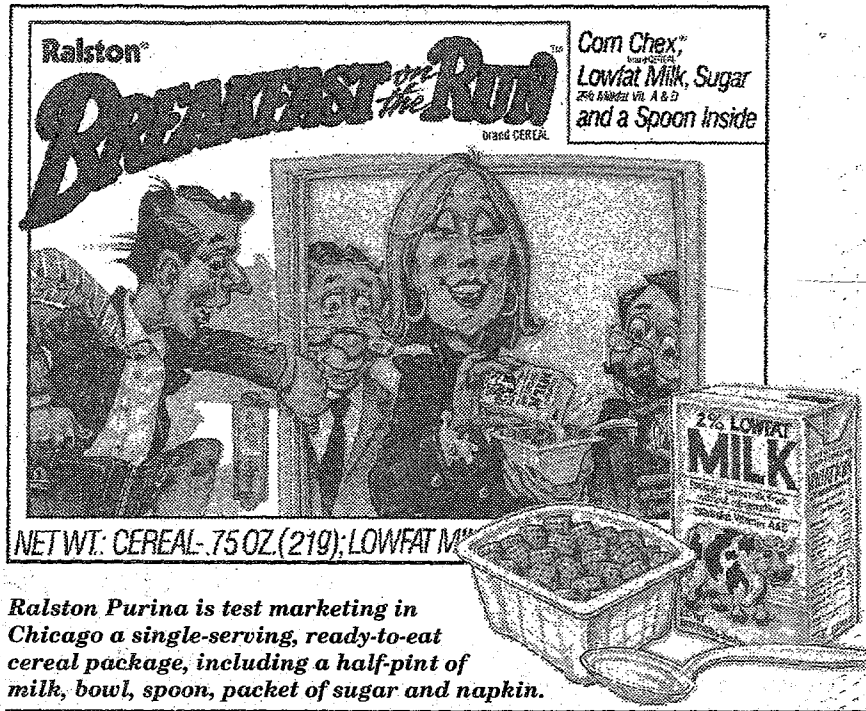
The big reason: fear.

"When you say 'shelf-stable,' you run into the perception that it has lots of stuff in it—chemicals—to keep it fresh," says Jack Trout, a Stamford, Conn., marketing consultant. "Today, people are talking fresh, no preservatives."

In fact, shelf-stable foods have few or no preservatives. Like canned foods, the new items are cooked at high temperatures that kill bacteria and allow the products to be stored for months without refrigeration.

Still, it's perception that turns a sale, not reality, and Kraft General Foods, a unit of Philip Morris Cos., knows all about that. Twice in the '80s, it rolled out shelf-stable, ready-to-eat meals that went nowhere. The first was called A La Carte, the second Impromptu.

Now, with its Kraft Microwave Entrees line, the company is joining a handful of others that also think consumers will come around to the shelf-stable part of the store eventually. Geo. A. Hormel & Co., which is staking much of its future on the category, has persuaded a few supermarket chains to create special sections in stores for shelf-stable items. Some grocers favor the shelf-stable concept because it alleviates pressure on their frozen-food cases, typically their most expensive space. But more often, shelf-stable products are mixed in with the dry macaroni dinners and soups.



Ralston Purina is test marketing in Chicago a single-serving, ready-to-eat cereal package, including a half-pint of milk, bowl, spoon, packet of sugar and napkin.

Hormel's lineup includes Top Shelf entrees, Micro Cup soups and entrees in plastic bowls, as well as microwaveable versions of such canned staples as its chili and beef stews.

Hormel is revamping its advertising to stimulate its shelf-stable sales, which analysts estimate at \$100 million a year. The company recently dumped Dick Cavett as its Top Shelf pitchman because, a spokesman says, "he wasn't fitting our needs as a celebrity demonstrator." New commercials appearing this week revolve around an "impatient gourmet" and this tagline: "For people who want to eat right now."

Other companies tiptoeing into the shelf-stable sector include Dial Foods, a unit of Greyhound Dial Corp., and Whitman Corp.'s Pet Foods unit. Dial, the first company with a microwaveable bowl line, called Lunch Buckets, is rolling out a low-calorie version called Light Balance. Newcomer Pet is introducing a half-dozen entrees under the Progresso to Go label. Priced at \$2.19 to \$2.69 or so, the items include such dishes as pasta primavera with red sauce, cheese tortellini salad and glazed chicken with rice and vegetables.

"This is just a spinoff from the canning industry, so we think the real issue isn't safety but the fact that, for entrees, people have been accustomed to frozen foods," says a Pet spokesman. But he adds that shelf-stable items "still aren't quite there yet" in competing with the quality and flavor of frozen.

Kraft finds itself in an unusual position: It already is a dominant player in frozen microwaveable entrees with its Budget Gourmet line. But a spokesman says the new shelf-stable entrees will be positioned primarily as being for lunch away from home, so as not to step on its frozen foods' feet. "The distinguishing benefit here is portability," a spokesman says.

Convenience is the big selling point for a line of kids' shelf-stable entrees made by My Own Meals Inc., a small Deerfield, Ill., concern. "We say, 'This is how you can use it. Take it to the baby sitter, take it to Grandma's,'" says Mary Anne Jackson, president.

A Dial spokesman says mountain climbers took 200 Lunch Bucket cups with them up the Chinese Himalayas, and

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heated the meals in hot water. Race-car pit crews have warmed the cups on car manifolds.

But Mona Doyle, whose Consumer Network Inc. tracks shoppers' opinions, says most "consumers are redefining 'convenience.' They're asking about a product's environmental side and cost. Convenience is not on the ascendancy anymore."

Ralston Purina Co. is about to find out. The St. Louis-based maker of pet foods, Twinkies and cereals is testing perhaps the riskiest of shelf-stable items yet: unrefrigerated milk. Half-pints of 2% milk are the big selling point—or turnoff—in a single-serving cereal box it calls "Breakfast on the Run." Besides a 1½-ounce plastic bowl of cereal (raisin bran, frosted flakes or Corn Chex) there's a container of milk, along with a spoon, packet of sugar and napkin. Priced at about \$1.29, it is being tested in some stores around Chicago and Milwaukee.

Shelf-stable, or aseptic, milk has been sold for years in Europe, but rarely in this country. "We don't know how people are going to react to it," a Ralston spokesman says. "It's a shot in the dark for us."