

# Stop the microwaveable foods bashing!

A closer look at this once red-hot category shows plenty of good news in sandwiches, frozen entrees, foodservice.

BY MARY ELLEN KUHN

**M**icrowaveable foods bashing has been a popular pursuit among members of the press for the past couple of years.

Echoing consumers, food writers have lamented the poor quality of many microwaveable products, complained about the inability of the once-exalted appliance to brown foods and heat them evenly, and pointed to the dramatic downturn in the number of microwaveable introductions. If the microwaveable products category were to receive a report card from such critics, the commentary would most likely read something along the lines of "not performing up to its potential."

There's really no arguing with these assessments, but taking a close look at a broad assortment of microwaveable foods suggests that reports of the category's demise may have been exaggerated. Or perhaps expectations were simply too high in the first place.

First, a glance at some of the more negative statistics. Like the fact that food products positioned as microwaveable accounted for only 4.8 percent of product introductions in 1994 vs. more than 14 percent in 1989, according to new product trackers at Marketing Intelligence. And the fact that in the 1980s, microwaveable foods were expected to be a \$4 billion market, but the category actually peaked at sales of \$1.35 billion in 1991.

That said, however, there are plenty of signs of life within the microwaveable foods market.

Consider the fact that manufacturers estimate the vast majority of frozen entrees (a \$3.2 billion market) and frozen dinners (with annual sales of \$1.1 bil-



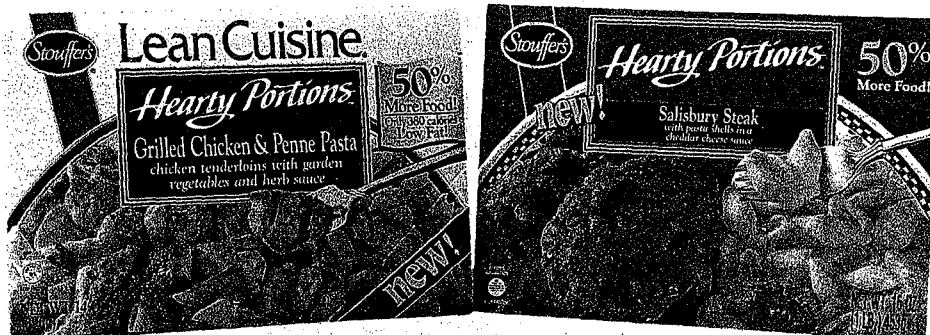
Campbell Soup has launched a new line of convenient lunch products for the microwave.

lion) are prepared in the microwave.

Nestle Frozen Food Co. studied preparation methods for its Lean Cuisine and Stouffer's brands several years ago and found most consumers zapped them in the microwave, says spokeswoman Roz O'Hearn. That's why the packages all list the microwave instructions first, followed by the conventional oven instructions, she says.

This spring, Nestle literally expanded its successful Stouffer's and Lean Cuisine brand with the rollout of 16 new Hearty Portions entrees boasting generous 14-ounce and 16-ounce servings.

Nestle is expanding its frozen entrees line with bigger portions.



Even the microwaveable shelf-stable meal segment, which is not generally viewed as a flourishing category, posted a 0.5 percent sales increase over the past year, for a respectable total of \$168.8 million.

In an interesting side note, kids meal creator Mary Anne Jackson is billing her shelf-stable entrees, which she has repositioned to target the kosher market, as "refrigeration-free" in an attempt to eliminate consumer confusion and bolster their image. It's true that consumers have largely abandoned the idea of using the microwave to cook from scratch, but the microwave's status as an important fixture

in American households is secure, points out Sharon Franke, a microwave cookery expert with the Good Housekeeping Institute and Good Housekeeping magazine.