



## Are we ready for “Ready Meals”?

By Chef Christopher Graham  
RATIONAL USA

Like many Americans, I hit the road five days a week returning to my humble home between 6 PM and 7 PM. I may be a Chef by trade, but like many Americans I have little time to cook for myself during the week. And, of course, my better half is also just as busy. Thus, one of us usually brings home a nice roast chicken with a salad or we sometimes bring home Thai or even Sushi from a local eatery. But that gets expensive and, to be honest, you have to wait sometimes 30 minutes for it.

We usually like to do our grocery shopping two or three times a week to get the freshest food possible. When it comes to the fresh prepared meal section, good Catholic boy that I am, it’s usually a brisk sign of the cross, a short silent prayer like “forgive them Father, they know not what they do” then run the other way. I see these HMR (home meal replacement) sections expanding at every retail grocer or convenience store I go to. So, no question the demand is there, but seriously, where do you think these meals get reheated? The trusty microwave of course! And what’s the usual outcome? I will leave that one to your imagination.

Then there are times when this “travelin man” must stay in hotel, usually your mid-scale “Courtyard” (minus the court) or “Garden Inn” (minus the garden). Rooms are clean, beds are soft and all is cozy. I usually hit these places late after a hard day and sometimes have to go to bed hungry. No, my Mother didn’t call ahead and tell them I was bad. This is the fastest growing hotel segment that attempts to meet a customer need by offering a market kiosk full of, you guessed it, peanuts, candy and a few frozen meals that are at best inedible. AND of course there’s that stainless steel contraption called the microwave again. If there was a simple chef-driven fresh meal that I could cook in two or three minutes and bring to my room; that would be the ticket for me.

**So why all of this “jibber jabber”? People, there’s a real need out there for change and the ICC is one way to help make a difference.**

Let’s consider the trends and where the research needs to happen. The statistics and marketing data on home meal



replacement is out there, but who is researching beyond the conventional microwave? About 12 years ago there was an article written on the future of microwave food from scratch. See this link: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-16805668.html> . The article suggests that speed scratch is still the buzzword and the use of the microwave was on a sharp decline. Now, with the advent of the automated high-powered convection microwave, this new trend seems to take speed scratch in new direction. But the reality is who has the time to prep and let's face it, who wants the mess? That's where an advanced packaging system will save the day.

What about the trend towards natural foods and the "farm to fork" movement? If formulated with integrity and promoted right, "Ready Meals" could be the answer to what many view as the sins of the processed food industry.

A couple of more things to consider:

There is a trend in the American consumer kitchen towards the coolest counters and shiniest stainless appliances. GE, Wolf, Viking, Miele, you name it they're out there. But just about everyone has a fancy microwave to go with the package. Why? Because it's convenient and quick! High-tech stainless kitchens are just for show and not for cooking from scratch and creating a mess.

As a corporate chef for one of the most well respected technology drivers in the food service equipment industry, I know the secret to producing quality cuisine comes from providing a consistent level of heat transfer that doesn't "kill the food." An equally important factor is managing core temperature. If the protein is undercooked, it will taste raw and may not be safe. If it's overcooked in the wrong heat medium, equipment such as a high-powered microwave can turn even the best quality protein into a fossil. Last but not least, "if it doesn't look right it won't eat right". Texture and appearance are the hallmark of the chef's craft.

**Great ingredients, quality heat transfer, core temperature and presentation**; just about every chef I work with measures success on the plate based their ability to control these variables. The future success of microwavable "Ready Meals" with raw or semi-cooked foods will depend in part on our ability to work closely with the microwave manufacturers and, of course, the best packaging technology to drive these principles home.

As far as the culinary role is concerned, I had a chat with one colleague who was a chef at a posh hotel in Beverly Hills, California. After giving a presentation on the benefits of sous vide and other modified atmosphere culinary techniques, she told me about their room service menu where all the main dishes are prepared with a high-heat sensitive pouch system and prepared in a combination cooking medium using the steam in the package. "The results were five star", she said. I thought to myself, we are on the verge.

January 2008