

RTE Sector: Food Safety, Nutritional Quality & Taste, and Packaging



After a long day of battling with exhaustive work, popping a ready meal into the microwave or oven might be more appealing than spending energy and time for home-cooking. In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 52% of the university students and employees consumed ready-to-eat (RTE) food about 2-4 times per week, with convenience (46%) being the biggest motivator for the purchase².

RTE food are now more available than ever in both supermarkets and online, but are they nutritious and worthwhile?

Here are 3 key points to consider when developing ready-to-eat meals.

1. Food Safety

Ready meals have developed a long way and now variety of gourmet meals ranging from specific cultural cuisine to organic and vegetarian options. Chilled (fresh) ready meals often made from high quality ingredients with full traceability at every stage of the food chain.

Foods are made to order with short production runs and are often delivered to retailers on the same day they were freshly made. Preservatives are usually not being used in chilled prepared foods thus the temperature is crucial in keeping the freshness³.

In contrast, the freezing process used in the frozen ready meals tends to degrade the taste of food. For this reason, these meals are added with extra salt and fat to compensate for the flavour. Stabilising these products for a long period of time typically means that preservatives will be used for some products⁴.

2. Nutritional Quality & Taste

Typically, some ready meals may not provide balanced nutrition options. They either provide too much carbohydrates or none at all, some are far too high in fat, low in protein and dietary fibre. Even so, whether they are chilled or frozen, there is still variability between brands. Nowadays with more consumers becoming increasingly health conscious and more likely to read food labels, F&B companies can incorporate more fruits, vegetables, fibre or reduce fat in ready meal offerings. Companies also need to ensure that the nutritional benefits of their healthier ready meals are reflected in nutrition facts panel and ingredient list. On the other hand, consumers do not want to sacrifice taste for convenience especially when travel and multiculturalism have changed their tastes and preferences over the years, leading to demand for authentic flavours from all over Asia and other parts of the world¹.

3. Packaging Technology

Packaging is another important aspect that affect shelf life of these products. “Ovenable” plastic-based materials which are generally used as tray, lidding foil or pouches are the main packaging materials. The combination with modified atmosphere or vacuum packaging showed improvements and prolongation of the shelf life⁶. Moreover, packaging

designs can be made more convenient in sense of ease to carry and hold, especially after heating¹.

In short,

Modern busy lifestyles today have led to a great demand for such convenience food products. RTE meals are not only offer calories to fuel the body. Nutrition is key, but taste is king. Desirable sensory characteristics also have a significant influence on consumers' food choice if it satisfies their own personal tastes. At DPO, our in-house brand – **Foodcraft** be sure to bring you a range of RTE foods that could ease and support your on-the-go lifestyles.

References

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