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Stone-Cold Boxes: Frozen Food Is Looking Good

TV dinners don't have to taste like the cardboard they're packed in. A few companies are making frozen food that's actually cool.



IN THE 21ST-CENTURY battle for American appetites, one clear loser has emerged: TV dinners. Sales have tumbled over the last five years, with many customers opting for higher-end fast-food like Chipotle, and millennials, who were raised to equate fresh with healthy, avoiding frozen meals altogether. So dire is the situation that this spring, food-manufacturing rivals including ConAgra and Nestlé came together to launch a multimillion-dollar marketing campaign to salvage the industry's reputation. Its slogan: Frozen: How Fresh Stays Fresh.

They have a point. Freezing is not inherently wrong; in fact, the technology brilliantly preserves flavors and nutrients. But perhaps a better strategy would be to hand over the PR to a new generation of companies that is working to satisfy modern appetites. Some stand out for their taste and sophisticated flavors. (One—see below—makes food good enough to serve at your next dinner party.) Others limit fat and sodium, use antibiotic-free and humanely raised meats, and liberally employ hip “nutrient-dense” ingredients such as pomegranate and kale. In short: You’ll be hard pressed to find what author and food guru Michael Pollan calls “foodlike substances” in these frozen dinners. Things are looking up.

Food Truck In Your Freezer

In 2002, Phil Anson decided he would try to make a few bucks selling burritos to mountain climbers in Colorado. A decade-plus later, his business, Evol—that’s “love” spelled backward—is a \$50 million brand in frozen foods. The burritos are still on offer, of course, but the company now churns out all manner of trendy entrees: rice bowls, “street tacos” (presumably inspired by the food-truck phenomenon) and breakfast sandwiches. Evol also has followed the trend for cleaner ingredients and sustainable packaging. The company uses antibiotic-free meat, plenty of whole grains and serves up much of its food in compostable bowls and trays.



The flavors are not as bold as the branding would suggest. A bulgogi beef bowl was more sweet than spicy—though a squirt of Sriracha fixed that—but the meat was tender and the mix of brown rice, carrots, snap peas and broccoli was tasty. The panang curry was a miss; bland, with 1100 mg of sodium to boot. But I was pretty pleased to find a mysterious, earthy aroma emanating from my microwave when I zapped Evol’s truffle-Parmesan mac and cheese. The dish was creamy but not heavy, and the truffle flavor was subtle, something that is not always easy to pull off. From \$1.99, available in supermarkets around the country, evolfoods.com