



## Dinner's Ready

GROCERS AIM TO PROVIDE AN ARRAY OF EVENING MEAL SOLUTIONS TO CONSUMERS STILL MAKING UP THEIR MINDS AT THE LAST MINUTE.

By Lynn Petrak

S

ix o'clock still rolls around every day, but dinner is anything but set in time.

Three squares a day? A dinner table with all family members present, passing a platter and bowls of sides? A from-scratch meal with a meat, starch and potato, maybe served with fruit and, if the family is lucky, dessert?

That's all a blast from the past, of course. For the present and future, dinner is all about the solution to a particular need, taste, lifestyle, occasion or other factor that influences what, where, how and with whom people eat, from early evening through late evening.

Because there are so many and disparate demands — not dinnertime-related problems per se — solutions are also varied.

"Today's consumers, including significantly more Millennials, are taking advantage of the broad range of convenient meal solution choices," notes Marianne Quinlan-Sacksteder, director of insights for Jacksonville, Fla.-based Acosta. Quinlan-Sacksteder points to the difference in meal solution choices now compared with a couple of years ago: Carry-out food is at 81 percent now, versus 69 percent two years ago; delivery food is at 72 percent versus 60 percent; grocery prepared foods are at 77 percent versus 64 percent; and meal/ingredient kits are at 42 percent versus 17 percent.

For grocers, the trick is getting shoppers to think of the supermarket as a provider of solutions that are broad in scope yet customized for individual needs. "The good

news is that grocers already are a valued resource for dinnertime solutions,” asserts Sarah Marion, Ph.D., director of syndicated research at The Hartman Group, in Bellevue, Wash. “However, there is plenty of room for improvement.”

Marion points out that customers must have a reason to trek to the store during the day, late afternoon or early evening. “Consumers’ main barriers to a home-cooked dinner are typically time and energy — if there’s no plan, then that is the dinner they’ll outsource to delivery or takeout,” she observes. “Grocers can help that plan come together.”

Forward-thinking food retailers already have solid plans to make dinnertime come together — in some parts of the world more than others. “We think that the big U.K. grocers — Tesco, Sainsbury, and Marks & Spencer — are leagues ahead of U.S. grocers on convenient dinner solutions,” says Marion. “They offer a huge array of meal deals with mix-and-match components and customizable sizing, like dinner for one, two or four, etc. Preparations are interesting, with trendy cuisines and flavors well represented, and because of this, they seem higher quality, fresher, and less processed than typical American frozen and convenience foods.”

Although most U.S. stores may not be at that level, they’ve changed significantly in terms of dinner offerings from how they were just five or 10 years ago. From grocerants to prepared food areas to grab-and-go cases to value-added proteins to frozen meals, there’s a veritable bounty of solutions for today’s shopper hungry for dinner of some kind or another.

## Key Takeaways

- ▶ **Grocers must get shoppers to think of the supermarket as a provider of solutions that are broad in scope yet customized for individual needs.**
- ▶ **With most consumers unsure what’s for dinner the same day that the meal occurs, more manufacturers and grocers are offering such solutions as ready-to-eat offerings and both fresh and frozen heat-and-eat dinners.**
- ▶ **Meal kits work best for shoppers with the time and ability to experiment in the kitchen.**

## Ready to Eat/Heat and Eat

Market research confirms that most people have no idea what’s for dinner, even right before the traditional dinner hours. According to Acosta’s “Behind the Dine” report, 85 percent of consumers decide what to eat for dinner the same day that the meal occurs.

With such a high degree of uncertainty, dinnertime solutions become pivotal. “People today are stressed for time after work and kids’ activities, so that preparing a nutritious, protein-rich meal in a limited amount of time can be a challenge,” says Ellen Lee-Allen, marketing manager at Acme Smoked Fish, based in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Increasingly, food manufacturers and retailers are doing the preparation for shoppers, and that includes the cooking. Ready-to-eat and heat-and-eat dinner solutions from grocerants, prepared food areas, delis and grab-go-cases comprise a growing part of grocers’ offerings, especially as retailers compete with restaurants and home delivery services such as Uber Eats, Grubhub and Door Dash.

Aaron Ballard is an executive chef at the Harmons Grocery chain in the Salt Lake City area, where he devises new recipes regularly for the stores’ Food to Go dinnertime business.

“We had done a non-cooked dinner kit, but we found that customers are more interested in heat and eat,” notes Ballard. At Harmons, he says, there are close to a dozen items on a rotating menu of dinners, and the nearly 3,800 shoppers comprising the store’s subscriber base receive daily texts alerting them to that night’s special.

One of the more popular dishes, according to Ballard, is classic meatloaf with mashed potatoes, packaged with raw asparagus that can be cooked by consumers in as much time as it takes to reheat the meatloaf in their home kitchen. Harmons offers dietitian-approved meals like salmon with garden rice and vegetables, or spiralized butternut squash with sliced portabella mushrooms, pumpkin seeds, zucchini, and marinara sauce, as well as more indulgent choices like pulled pork with barbecue sauce and au gratin potatoes. Meals run between \$16 and \$24 and serve around four people.

Another option for busy consumers is a bundle of two large soups packaged with artisan rolls. “It flies off the shelf,” observes Ballard.

Beyond grocerant menus and prepared foods, heat-and-eat frozen dinners, which had been part of a declining or flat category, are coming to consumers’ rescue. Large brands like Stouffer’s and Healthy Choice have updated their product lines with new offerings and packages to appeal to the dinner crowd.

Smaller and specialty frozen food brands offer a spate of inno-



vative frozen dinners, including organic and natural products, and meals with authentic ethnic flavors. Acme, for example, has introduced a line of Blue Hill Bay Protein Bowls, which are ready in two minutes and come in Harissa or Lemon Dill varieties. “You only have to heat up the pre-cooked rice packets in the microwave for one minute, flake the salmon portion and mix in the sauce,” explains Lee-Allen. “Just add your favorite topping, and you’re ready to enjoy.”

### Meal Kits

A few years into the meal-kit trend, many grocers have them as part of their dinner program. But is it the solution that it was touted to be?

“This is a great question that we’re still wrestling with,” replies Marion, noting that shoppers seem to like the idea of in-store meal kits, but the execution is up for debate. “Price points that are palatable at restaurants — or even

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at online meal-kit companies — become less so in the context of the grocery store, where consumers are very focused on saving money. And from our experience listening to consumers, they tend to evaluate a meal kit the way they would a restaurant meal. They look for restaurant-level flavor experiences, and one undesired ingredient can be a reason not to buy a kit. Related to this, meal kits also offer a variety of supply, packing and shipping challenges for retailers, of course.”

There are upsides to meal kits, however, and that may be on occasions when people have more time to experiment in the kitchen. As Marion says: “They get to try something new with much less risk. We think that there is a long-term market for meal kits, but it is likely among those who already know how and like to cook.”

Acosta’s research likewise finds both opportunities and challenges with meal kits. “When asked about the preferred level of preparation and cooking needed for an

‘ideal’ meal/ingredient kit, diners were more likely to feel that [it] should take more preparation time than ‘average,’ and involve some cooking ability or offer new skills,” notes Quinlan-Sacksteder.

### DIY and Almost-DIY

Of course, grocery stores also cater to shoppers who prefer a DIY or almost-DIY dinner. Even in the meat and produce departments, though, convenience is highlighted, with items like easier-to-cook proteins and pre-portioned vegetables.

Merriam, Kansas-based Seaboard Foods is one brand offering solutions for time-crunched consumers, including a new cook-in

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bag for its Prairie Fresh line of pork. “This product line was developed to help the home cook who didn’t have the time or the knowledge of how to prepare fresh pork at home,” says David Eaheart Sr., Seaboard’s director of communications and brand marketing. The package signals the product’s ease of use, with an oven icon and copy lines like “No Prep. No Mess.”

### In-Store Eats and Cross-Merch

Acosta’s research shows that eating in store is a real option: 48 percent of diners told the company that they ate in a store’s foodservice dining area at some point in the week prior to being polled.

In addition to the range of dinner solutions, how those solutions are communicated and merchandised is pivotal to a grocer’s success. “Cross-merchandising that brings together different components for a tasty, quickly made meal — ideally with a fresh component — is one option that really seems underleveraged,” observes Marion, of The Hartman Group. **PG**