

TV On a Tray: Prepared Meals and Food Culture in the United States, 1950 - Present

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Introduction

In 1953, the Swanson Company faced a dilemma: over 260 tons of leftover Thanksgiving turkey across 10 refrigerated cars traveling back and forth 24/7 from the East Coast to Nebraska. The resulting solution led to the invention of the Swanson TV Dinner, which over the course of the late 20th century, led to the development of hundreds of frozen and pre-prepared meals. While the Swanson TV Dinner was not the first fully reheatable meal - that title goes to the Strato-Plate invented by Maxson Food Systems Inc. - it was the first to become a mass-produced frozen meal for the home. Conversely, the Strato-Plate was used mostly in the military and on planes.¹

As such, observing the history of prepared meals beginning at the Swanson TV Dinner instead of the Strato-Plate is more accurate for the purposes of this research. The primary reason for Swanson's supremacy in the growth of prepared meals was the direct marketing of the frozen meals to TV, a growing technology in the mid-twentieth century. Economic research has shown that prepared meals are direct substitutes to food-away-from-home, indicating the way that ready-to-eat meals have

¹ Movie Biakolo. "A Brief History of the TV Dinner - Thanksgiving's most unexpected legacy is heating up again." Smithsonian, November 1, 2020. NewsBank: Access World News Research Collection. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.neu.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/17E994855D13B5D8>.

permeated the American kitchen.² Since the humble origins of the TV Dinner as a meal of turkey, mashed potatoes, and peas on an aluminum tray, the frozen food industry has expanded exponentially, gaining a worth of over \$22 billion as of 2005.³

While Swanson was acquired by Campbell's in 1955 and now also focuses on a line of stocks and soups, the invention of the TV dinner and more broadly the development of prepared meals have become ingrained in American culture almost directly parallel to the development of TV culture throughout the 1950s, 60s, and beyond. The reheatable meal is everywhere in our society from frozen meals at Trader Joes to ready-to-eat lunch boxes, and is ever present in the history and culture of the United States. As such, understanding the history of such meals and their impacts on American culture is essential to have a full understanding of food's legacy in the United States.

An important aspect to studying prepared meals is defining the exact specifications for such a meal. In "Demand for Prepared Meals by U.S. Households", John L. Park and Oral Capps, Jr. define two key identifications that make up all foods: whether the food is a snack, component, or meal, and whether the food is unprepared, semi-prepared, or fully prepared.⁴ They similarly discuss "convenience foods" which, while not entirely prepared meals, are related. As laid out in their methodology, Park and Capps define a prepared meal as a complete meal which was processed for reasons other than solely preservation, is not primarily used as a basic ingredient, and does not require

² John L. Park and Oral Capps, "Demand for Prepared Meals by U.S. Households," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 79, no. 3 (1997): 814–24, Accessed October 29, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1244423>.

³ Lauren Gust, "Defrosting Dinner: The Evolution of Frozen Meals in America," *Intersect: The Stanford Journal of Science, Technology, and Society* 4 (October 13, 2011): 48–56.

⁴ John L. Park and Oral Capps, "Demand for Prepared Meals by U.S. Households," 815-817.

significant effort outside of heating prior to consumption.⁵ It is also important to distinguish frozen meals from prepared meals. While all frozen meals are arguably prepared meals, many prepared meals are not frozen, such as Lunchables. For the purposes of this research, I have chosen to focus specifically on prepared meals made for at home consumption. This is because much of the cultural development during the latter half of the twentieth century took place within the household. Though prepared meals do not exclusively exist in the home, to narrow the scope of this research and obtain more accurate results as to the culture surrounding food, focus will be placed on meals intended for reheating and consumption at home as opposed to, for example, a prepared sandwich in an airport market meant to be eaten in a gate or on a plane, despite both fitting the definition of a prepared meal.

As media becomes more entrenched in the lives of Americans, it is crucial to study the relationship between how Americans consume food and mass media along with how food has impacted Americans' relationship to media and other Americans along domestic lines. This research aims to analyze the ways that prepared meals have impacted American family life and the relationship between food and media. Since its invention in the 1950s, prepared meals have fundamentally shifted the way Americans eat and act. This paper argues that by giving way to a new wave of eating patterns and practices, the prepared meal has served as the most important force in shaping modern-day culture surrounding food, health, media, and the American family.

Literature Review

Prepared Meals and Changing Food Cultures

⁵ John L. Park and Oral Capps, "Demand for Prepared Meals by U.S. Households," 818.

In existing literature, studies have found connections between prepared meals, most notably TV Dinners, and the culture surrounding food. Food culture is defined by Sidney Mintz in “The Anthropology of Food and Eating” as the practices of eating food along with the attitudes and beliefs that follow food production, harvesting, formation, and consumption.⁶ This definition allows analysis of food to go beyond simply the food itself and instead connect to the broader cultures and societies in which it exists. For research on ready-made meals and their cultural impacts, this theoretical framework for viewing food is particularly useful. Practices surrounding the relationship between prepared meals and media consumption are of great interest. Studies surrounding the impacts of eating in front of a TV have found negative correlations between such viewing and dietary health.⁷ Similar research has been conducted regarding TV viewing and dietary health in children, finding that eating while watching TV is an obesogenic factor.⁸ These studies are useful in providing data on the concrete relationships between food and television.

However, such studies neglect to mention TV Dinners specifically and do not situate such data in a historical context, which is the aim of this research. The relationship between TV Dinners and media have been researched in a historical context by historian Linda Civitello in *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People*. However, this analysis is brief and is only mentioned in an anecdote surrounding the invention of JiffyPop.⁹ Civitello

⁶ Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois, “The Anthropology of Food and Eating,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 99–119.

⁷ Amanda C. Trofholz et al., “Associations between TV Viewing at Family Meals and the Emotional Atmosphere of the Meal, Meal Healthfulness, Child Dietary Intake, and Child Weight Status,” *Appetite* 108 (January 1, 2017): 361–66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2016.10.018>.

⁸ Roma Jusienė et al., “Screen Use During Meals Among Young Children: Exploration of Associated Variables,” *Medicina* 55, no. 10 (October 2019): 688, <https://doi.org/10.3390/medicina55100688>.

⁹ Linda Civitello, *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2011), 331.

argues that TV Dinners led to an increase in at-home movie watching, which in turn led to a downturn in the popcorn industry, leading to a rise in at-home popcorn, most notably JiffyPop.¹⁰ Food culture has also been connected to architecture. Through her book *The Food Axis: Cooking, Eating, and the Architecture of American Houses*, Elizabeth Cromley outlines a history of American architecture through the lens of food spaces, what she dubs the “food axis”, a collection of cooking materials, people, food itself, and cultures that interact, align, and shape the venues where people have traditionally dined.¹¹ Such an analysis of architecture connects to both Mintz’s analysis of food cultures and to cultures of food and media consumption by looking at both the ways people interact with food and how food has shaped culture itself.

Health and Prepared Meals

Concerning the health impacts of ready-made meals, significant research has covered statistical and scientific bases. These studies can be broken down primarily into two camps, one with studies on the general health of prepackaged meals and another studying specifically the impacts of such meals on children. These two groups are intimately related and have become especially relevant as obesity - childhood obesity in particular - has risen since the 1980s. A study on the overall nutritional content of ready-made meals in the United Kingdom found that in comparing 100 cookbook recipes and 100 ready meals, no recipes or prepared meals matched WHO guidelines for nutritional health.¹² It is worth noting in this study that the

¹⁰ Civitello, *Cuisine and Culture*, 331.

¹¹ Elizabeth Cromley, *The Food Axis: Cooking, Eating, and the Architecture of American Houses* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 2.

¹² Simon Howard, Jean Adams, and Martin White, “Nutritional Content of Supermarket Ready Meals and Recipes by Television Chefs in the United Kingdom: Cross Sectional Study,” *BMJ* 345 (December 17, 2012), 3-4, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.e7607>.

recipes compared to reheatable meals were found to be overall less healthy, containing significantly more calories, fats, and protein per portion.¹³ Many experts such as Michael Moss specifically target them as unhealthy and label them as “junk food”. Moss analyzes the “science behind junk food” and discusses why junk food like Lunchables are so addictive, framing his arguments around growing obesity numbers in children.¹⁴

The marketing of ready-made meals play a large role in why they have been consumed in such high numbers by children. Some scholars have called for higher government regulations on food marketing towards children.¹⁵ They find that higher levels of marketing are connected to childhood obesity and that a significant amount of advertisements that target children are for calorie-high, low-nutrient food.¹⁶ Such research is directly tied to ready-made meals despite having a lack of focus on them specifically. Because many prepared meals are targeted towards children, connecting this existing research to new research on the history of ready-made meals is a necessary step in fully analyzing their impact on health and children. Studies on foods marketed specifically as “better-for-you” have yielded similar results to Linn and Novosat, finding intimate relationships between the actual health of these foods and the marketing of them as healthy foods.¹⁷ Food has also been shown

¹³ Howard, Adams, and White, “Nutritional Content of Supermarket Ready Meals and Recipes,” 3.

¹⁴ Michael Moss, “The Extraordinary Science of Addictive Junk Food,” in *The Best Business Writing 2014*, ed. Dean Starkman, Martha M. Hamilton, and Ryan Chittum (Columbia University Press, 2014), 306, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/star17015.24>.

¹⁵ Susan Linn and Courtney L. Novosat, “Calories for Sale: Food Marketing to Children in the Twenty-First Century,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 615 (2008): 147-149. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25097980>.

¹⁶ Linn and Novosat, “Calories for Sale”, 136.

¹⁷ Charlene Elliott, “Packaging Health: Examining ‘Better-for-You’ Foods Targeted at Children,” *Canadian Public Policy / Analyse de Politiques* 38, no. 2 (2012): 265–81.

to have direct connections to mental health. In his research, Jamie Horowitz introduces the idea of “eating on the edge”, in which food is used as an additive to a situation “such as a cigarette would be.”¹⁸ This study introduces the idea of an instrumental purpose for food outside of simply existing and subsisting. Ready-made meals fit into this paradigm, especially with their connection to media consumption and TV.

Marketing and Gender

Analyzing the impacts of ready-made meals on gender roles and their use of marketing is critical for this research. The marketing of TV Dinners was crucial to their success and permeation into most of American society. In the early years, frozen food producers found mass-market success. The primary way in which they achieved such success was by shifting their marketing to portray frozen foods as low-cost convenience goods and then towards new products associated with different groups.¹⁹ This research reveals the importance of marketing to the history of ready-made meals. Marketing materials are especially important as primary sources regarding ready-made meals, specifically in the goals and motivations behind these products. Hamilton’s research reveals this importance for frozen foods at large but focuses largely on frozen vegetables such as Birds Eye and only briefly mentions frozen meals specifically. This research on frozen meals has been conducted on marketing and TV dinners specifically and found that it was Swanson’s successful marketing campaigns that led to the growth of Swanson TV Dinners around the United States. Attractive packaging and tray design may have been some of the largest reasons for the positive reception to Swanson.²⁰ This research

¹⁸ Jamie Horowitz, “Eating at the Edge,” *Gastronomica* 9, no. 3 (2009): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2009.9.3.42>.

¹⁹ Lauren Gust, “Defrosting Dinner: The Evolution of Frozen Meals in America,” 48.

²⁰ Gust, “Defrosting Dinner”, 50.

will attempt to connect this marketing research done on Swanson to the broader historical context surrounding prepared meals.

Gender in marketing is an important consideration when regarding research on food. Because of the intimate relationship between gender and food, observing the portrayal of gender roles in advertisements is incredibly important. When men are portrayed in an advertisement, they are traditionally portrayed as authority figures and entitled. This idea has been specifically applied to research on food advertisements.²¹ Through *Food is Love, Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America*, Katherine Parkin establishes the relationship between gender roles and the portrayal of food, especially prepared foods, in advertisements. Applying the lens of gender to marketing, especially considering the period 1950 - Present, is useful for research in the role of food in the home.

Gender itself also plays a large role in analyzing prepared meals. Tracey Deutsch justifies combining gender and food and explains the importance of gender to debates about food.²² She claims that gender opens new doors for analyzing the societal uses and place of food.²³ Deutsch's work does not focus on frozen food or ready-made meals, but gives a useful justification for discussing gender and food. Similarly, Shelley Koch argues through *Gender and Food: A Critical Look at the Food System* that gender is a central idea to the production and consumption of food, corroborating Deutsch's argument that

²¹ Katherine J. Parkin, "Authority and Entitlement: Men in Food Advertising," in *Food Is Love, Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 125–58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fj682.7>.

²² Tracey Deutsch, "Home, Cooking: Why Gender Matters to Food Politics," in *Food Fights*, ed. Charles C. Ludington and Matthew Morse Booker, *How History Matters to Contemporary Food Debates* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 208, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469652917_ludington.16.

²³ Deutsch, "Home, Cooking", 209.

food and gender are interlinked.²⁴ The 1950s are an important time to be discussing gender. As culture changed in the post-war era, so did the role of women, especially in conjunction with food. In *Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender and Race*, Sherrie Inness discusses such relationships between women and food and the ways that women were and are represented with food. Frozen foods were discussed in conjunction with their impacts on women, specifically in presenting a convenient time-saver in the kitchen.²⁵ This research can be extended to prepared meals outside of just the post-war era and into the latter-half of the 20th century in general. Food didn't impact women alone - it also has been shown to impact families. In *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, Lynn Spigel analyzes the impact of television on the family, referring to TV dinners and other food as well.²⁶

Historical Context

The history of prepared meals begins with the history of food preservation at large. Without food preservation, it would be impossible to produce and store meals that would keep while cooked. Preservation is necessary not only for the actual edibility of food but also the enjoyability. Even if food was edible, if it was not remotely palatable, eating food would be nearly impossible. An important aspect to food preservation is the preservation of color. This has been shown to be historically capitalized on by corporations going back to the 1800s.²⁷ The preservation of color

²⁴ Shelley L. Koch, *Gender and Food: A Critical Look at the Food System* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 4.

²⁵ Sherrie A Inness, *Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender and Race* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 159.

²⁶ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 90.

²⁷ Ai Hisano, *Visualizing Taste: How Business Changed The Look of What You Eat* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 5-6.

goes into the preservation of food palatability as well as food health. The need for preservation has existed since food itself has existed. Early preservation methods included pickling, salting, fermenting, and drying among others. However, the most important development in the history of prepared meals is the creation of quick freezing. Freezing began as a method of preservation in the early 1800s as mechanical refrigeration grew with the Industrial Revolution. The next major development in food preservation was fast freezing invented by Clarence Birdseye in 1927.²⁸ Birdseye's invention was primarily used for freezing vegetables but allowed for frozen foods to break into the scene opening a new sect of convenience, ready-made foods that would eventually grow into ready-made meals.

As previously mentioned, the first reheatable meal was Maxson's "Strato-Plate", debuting in 1945.²⁹ The Strato-Plate shares many features with prepared meals in the modern day with sectioned trays, multiple small courses, and most importantly, the ability to be refrigerated, stored, and quickly heated up. However, Strato-Plates were not primarily used in the home. Rather, their main function was as military and airplane meals. The title of first household prepared meal goes to Swanson's prepared meal lines, eventually called TV Dinners. As the ready-made meal industry grew, brands such as Stouffer's, Lean Cuisine, LibbyLand, and others emerged as competitors to Swanson. The next major advancement in the history of prepared meals was technological: the invention and popularization of the microwave. The microwave was a relatively new technology in the 1980s as indicated by its presence as one

²⁸ Clarence Birdseye, 1930, "Refrigerating Apparatus", United States Patent 1,773,081, filed 18 June 1927, and issued 12 August 1930.

²⁹ "Who 'Invented' the TV Dinner?," The Library of Congress, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/everyday-mysteries/item/who-invented-the-tv-dinner/>.

of many “new basics” present in the kitchen.³⁰ The prepared meal industry quickly responded with new lines of microwaveable meals with vastly shortened cook times. Microwavable meals have remained the norm for ready-made meals even moving into the twenty-first century.

For this investigation into the impacts of prepared meals, a starting date of 1950 is appropriate. Although this leaves out the early histories of Birds Eye and the Strato-Plate, it wasn't until Swanson in 1954 that ready-made meals entered the home. For a study on the impacts of prepared meals on domestic life and families, starting at when ready-made meals began being eaten in homes is the best starting point. Although its predecessors are important to the overall history, they are not as important when looking at the impact of these meals on the household and on the daily life of Americans. That isn't to say Birds Eye and other frozen foods along with earlier prepared meals won't be *discussed*, but in terms of usage of the American family, frozen foods became impactful in the 1950s. Furthermore, viewing prepared meals from a thematic point of view as opposed to a strictly chronological one allows a study of impacts directly to be more effective. Viewing the specific changes made to homes because of the introduction of prepared meals along the lines of culture, entertainment, and health are inherently thematic as opposed to chronological. Otherwise, discussions of periodization and chronology, though important, would obfuscate discussions of important changes along thematic lines.

Prepared Meals and Food Culture

The introduction of prepared meals to the household in the early 1950s added a new aspect to eating at home. Prior to fully reheatable (or in some cases ready out of the box) meals,

³⁰ Julee Rosso and Sheila Lukins, *The New Basics Cookbook* (New York, NY: Workman Pub., 1989), 766.

cooking full meals for families was often time and/or labor intensive and largely burdened housewives. However, prepared meals were portrayed as convenient for families in particular, advertising quick meals that would satisfy. It is important to note that Swanson TV Dinners among other early prepared meals were advertised as full, multicourse meals that would fill families and not as quick bites to eat.³¹ Advertisements from Swanson show the many courses in TV Dinners, ranging from an appetizer or soup, an entrée including meat and sides, and a dessert. Swanson's first line of TV dinners came in three varieties: roast beef, turkey, and fried chicken, all including at least two courses.³² This distinguishing feature set Swanson apart from frozen food at large, which had already been in production for much of the early twentieth century. Rather than provide a component of a meal, Swanson provided a full meal that, once heated, was ready to be put on tables as opposed to simply being preserved. Much of the growth of prepared foods is also a result of their convenience and speed compared to cooking with strictly fresh ingredients while still maintaining quality. While not a fully prepared meal, advertisements from the Birds Eye corporation reveal this growing trend of convenient, ready foods through their frozen green beans.³³ Birds Eye presents frozen green beans not only as easy to make beans but also as a cheaper, quicker

³¹ "Swanson 3 Course Frozen Dinners," Accessed October 28, 2021, <https://iaddb.org/collections/commercials/detail/35b2446b-3402-17fc-07df-ed0f33f3d72a/media/b1118749-1746-8957-080b-392dabbe5d6d?mode=detail&view=gallery&q=Swanson%20TV%20Dinner&rows=1&page=1>.

³² "Swanson Night", AAVA104 VZ124, Advertising Archive, Everett Collection, https://everettcollection.com/#/image/321553/0/CfDJ8N_Xv84g6cRLikass1s0uQK78ZeZoUKYd7TEnrVvmIts8ZFmJDLpdy_n7adMGG29uIii9spGO7wjhJG UI33EstEjHAAq-epPnFr6KkIR4JDes_NQzfnCUC198j4lwQ14VA?query=AAVA104%20VZ124.

³³ Birds Eye Green Beans, General Foods Corp., "Doris comes up with LOW-COST WINNER!," advertisement, *Life*, April 3rd, 1950, 38.

option with the same quality as fresh beans. Such an advertisement coupled with the known growth of Swanson and Birds Eye as giants in their respective fields (frozen meals and frozen vegetables) reveal major changes in cooking and eating practices, most notably the introduction of convenience eating to the general populace. As the century moved forward, the convenience factor of prepared meals only boosted their popularity. In 1990, frozen pizzas were hailed for their ability to provide a full meal to families for an incredibly cheap price and in little time with little effort. In the same year, the president of the National Frozen Pizza Institute was quoted as noting that “mealtime consumption of frozen pizza is bound to go up because of the price benefit. No other food delivers this much taste and nutritional value for the money.”³⁴ Similarly, Swanson Hungry Man meals released in 1973 were especially popular because of their advertised cheapness and convenience, being targeted towards literal “hungry men” who wanted larger portions and more hearty meals.³⁵ Through clever marketing and the creation of the new genre of convenience foods, the prepared meal industry was able to attain consistent growth. Similarly, the monetary benefits of ready-made meals cannot go unmentioned when discussing why they permeated so successfully into the United States’ culinary cultural canon.³⁶

The role of women as it relates to new ready-made meals is similarly important to consider, as women played an integral role in home cooking during the 1950s and further. In peacetime, the role of women shifted drastically from the important vocational role they previously served during wartime.

³⁴ Florence Fabricant, “Frozen Pizzas To Feed a Nation Of Homebodies,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 1990.

³⁵ FCB Chicago, “Campbell’s: XXL BIRTHDAY”, August 2003, Swanson’s Hungry Man (Campbell’s), AdsSpot, <https://adspot.me/media/tv-commercials/swansons-hungry-man-xxl-birthday-bab66c5963a5>.

³⁶ Ronald Reagan, “Frozen Food Day, 1984, Proclamation 5157 of March 6th, 1984,” *Federal Register* 49, no. 46 (March 7, 1984): 8417, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1984-03-07/pdf/FR-1984-03-07.pdf>.

Women were primarily relegated to household roles such as cooking, cleaning, and raising children whereas men were the heads of households and served as the breadwinners. These trends overall continued as prepared meals entered the food scene but had a unique impact on the future of the role of women at home. Many believed that frozen meals would emancipate women from their domestic roles by providing more time that would allow them to enter the workforce. In his short story, “Frozen Foods 2000 a.d.: A Fantasy of the Future”, E.W. Williams imagines a futuristic world in which women have been liberated from their culinary roles and provides the entire world with prosperity.³⁷ While, of course, Williams’ dream of a frozen utopia did not fully come true, it is true that prepared meals gave new time to women by giving them a quick but still complete meal to serve to their family. However, it is worth noting that prepared meals, despite possibly lending progress, by no means solved the issues that plagued women and women’s rights in the latter half of the twentieth century. Cooking remained a woman’s responsibility in the household, even if the only actual *cooking* done was turning on an oven. In fact, frozen meals added new challenges to adjusting to the modern household. As prepared meals entered the scene in the late 1940s, housewives expressed a desire for more clear instructions. Frozen meals were not common until this time, and so instruction on storage and preparation was necessary for the products’ success.³⁸

Swanson did little to actively break down this dynamic, even comparing their meals to a homemade meal by a housewife, with a billboard advertising Swanson TV Dinners as

³⁷ Shane Hamilton, “The Economics and Conveniences of Modern-Day Living: Frozen Foods and Mass Marketing, 1945-1965,” *The Business History Review* 77, no. 1 (2003): 33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/30041100>.

³⁸ Elizabeth Sweeney, “What We Have Found Out About Frozen Foods,” *Journal of Home Economics* 41, no. 1 (January 1949): 25–26. https://reader.library.cornell.edu/docviewer/digital?id=hearth4732504_41_001#page/27/mode/2up

“closest to her cooking”, featuring a smiling man.³⁹

Advertisements such as the aforementioned billboard perpetuated the stereotypical gender roles that were common to the 1950s and 60s. Instead of comparing prepared meals to fresh food, the comparisons were oftentimes to a woman’s home cooking. Throughout the majority of the 1950s and 60s, the processed food industry largely ignored working women, instead turning their eyes towards housewives.⁴⁰ However, as sales dipped, frozen meals began being targeted to working class families and notably working women.⁴¹ Later in the century, lines specifically targeted at African Americans also entered the scene such as Birds Eye southern vegetables. While economically motivated, this expansion of audience broadened access to ready-to-eat meals and legitimized working-class women and minorities by including them in the advertised audience.

During the latter half of the century, a new demographic entered the scene as a major consumer of ready-made meals: children. Looking to expand the types of prepared meals, companies looked towards working families under the idea that parents are busy during the day and need an easy, fun, and nutritious meal for their kids. Prepared meals perfectly fit these requirements and as such kid-focused prepared meals were released. The first major TV dinner targeted directly at children was Libbyland released during the 1970s. Libbyland’s children focused approach included creating mascots, the hero, Libby the Kid, and the villain, Mean Gene, and giving meals adventurous names such as “Pirate Picnic” and “Sundown Supper”. From Libbyland meals emerged modern kids meals such as Kid

³⁹ Duke Digital Collections, “Swanson TV Dinners Closest to Her Cooking / Resource of Outdoor Advertising Descriptions (ROAD) / Duke Digital Repository,” Accessed October 28, 2021, <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/outdooradvertising/BBB5215>.

⁴⁰ Harvey A. Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 73.

⁴¹ Shane Hamilton, “Economies and Conveniences of Modern-Day Living” 53.

Cuisine and Lunchables, Lunchables being notable for the fact that it does not require reheating and thus could be conveniently packed for school lunches.⁴²

Kid Cuisine meals were advertised towards busy parents, with commercials featuring a child happy that his parents can't cook for him because it meant he got Kid Cuisine meals.⁴³ Similarly, Lunchables was able to appeal to children by advertising power during lunchtime with the slogan "All day, you gotta do what they say. But lunchtime is all yours".⁴⁴ These meals not only contained "kid-friendly" foods such as chicken nuggets and ham and cheese stackers but also were designed *for* children, with blending between popular children's characters and such meals being commonplace. A modern example of this phenomenon is Kid Cuisine partnering with Nickelodeon to create Kid Cuisine meals branded with characters from the *Hotel Transylvania* franchise.⁴⁵ This partnership between the food industry and film industry was mutually beneficial: kids meals grew in recognizability, and the film industry gained a new medium to advertise their characters and franchises. By empowering children to take control over their own lunch, Lunchables was able to grow exponentially among young audiences. Thus, marketing towards children became an important growth factor for prepared meals and this change marked an important turning point for the cultural place of prepared meals within American society.

⁴² "Lunchables Rocket Commercial," B2Y Productions, Facebook, August 13, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/B2Yproductions/videos/1463642730689600/>.

⁴³ MusicalNostalgiaCat, "Kid Cuisine Commercials {90s-00s}" (YouTube, December 25, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBAIpMpSGrc&ab_channel=MusicalNostalgiaCat, (0:12-0:42).

⁴⁴ Michael Moss, *Salt, Sugar, Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us* (New York: Random House, 2014), 21.

⁴⁵ Nickelodeon Creative Advertising, "Kid Cuisine: On The Run", October 2015, Kid Cuisine, AdsSpot, <https://adsspot.me/media/tv-commercials/kid-cuisine-on-the-run-456b98fe3bc1>.

A shift to children-focused meals during the 1970s through the present have opened up new concerns about the health and nutritional content of prepared meals, especially regarding a growing obesity epidemic. Despite links between obesity and food advertisement being found in research, much of the advertisements for food targeted at children are “energy-dense, low-nutrient food.”⁴⁶ This, along with an overall growth in nutritional health outreach in general, led to new perceptions of prepared meals as full meals. Despite previously being seen as full, nutritious meals, the more processing that went into preparing prepared meals, the less these meals were seen as legitimate food sources for children.⁴⁷ This shift in the perception of prepared meals greatly influenced strategies taken by ready-made meal producers, which will be discussed in the next section.

Through their integration in American households, prepared meals created new forms of cooking and consumption, most notably in the realm of convenience. By marketing meals explicitly as new ways for families to come together with quick, cheap eats, prepared meals fundamentally changed how food functioned within the household during the 1950s and further. They similarly had effects on the role of women within the household, opening new ideas about women’s liberation from domestic roles. As prepared meals grew, new audiences rose. Meals were soon targeted towards specific races, classes, and even children, which significantly impacted how prepared meals were perceived within society.

Perception of Prepared Meals

Throughout the history of prepared meals, a distinctive shift in public views on ready-made meals can be observed. The first concerns regarding processed meals were not regarding the nutritional content or impacts on health caused by these meals,

⁴⁶ Susan Linn and Courtney L. Novosat, “Calories for Sale”, 140.

⁴⁷ Densie Webb, “Eating Well,” *The New York Times*, February 14th, 1990.

rather, the concerns that were put forth focused more so on the domestic impacts of frozen and prepared meals. As established previously, ready-made meals of the early 1950s and 60s were advertised as full, multicourse meals and not as light meals or as quick snacks, even going so far as to claim equality with home cooked meals. Two major concerns stood out in these early days of ready-made meals: the influence of science on food and how homes could adjust to new technology required for preserving and heating prepared meals.

Philip Wylie, a science fiction writer, was an outspoken critic of technologically influenced food, writing in his essay “Science Has Spoiled My Supper” that technology has broken down the home and ruined the tastes and colors of food. He criticizes the impact of mass production and economies of scale, claiming that while science preserves food, it also ruins the experience of eating and makes the food barely edible.⁴⁸ For example, Wylie discusses cheese at length, pointing out that with science, “it is possible to turn out in quantity a bland, impersonal, practically imperishable substance more or less resembling, say, cheese”.⁴⁹ While similar criticisms are made in the present, it is important to note that Wylie is criticizing the culinary aspects of processed foods, not their nutritional content or the health impacts that processing has. Similarly, housewives made criticisms on the ease of use of prepared meals, specifically regarding their ease of use and the quality of the ingredients within meals.⁵⁰ A survey of homemakers revealed that there was inconsistency in the quality of frozen meals such as uneven cuts on vegetables that could lead to uneven cooking. Another criticism made by the same homemakers was a lack of clarity in instructions. They point out not understanding what “thaw” meant specifically, and that in general, frozen foods have unclear

⁴⁸ Samuel N. Bogorad, Cary B. Graham, and Philip Wylie, “Science Has Spoiled My Supper,” Essay, In *Atlantic Essays*, 229. Boston: Heath, 1958.

⁴⁹ Philip Wylie, “Science Has Spoiled My Supper,” 230.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Sweeney, “What We Have Found Out About Frozen Foods,” 25.

instructions on how to prepare them.⁵¹ This indicates that the problems people had with prepared meals and more broadly pre-prepared foods were culinary and domestic in nature.

However, as prepared meals grew in popularity and involved more processing, their health impacts became a main area of concern for consumers. This shift in public perception can be seen clearly in the rise of studies regarding the health impacts of prepared meals in recent years. Studies have found relationships between prepared meals and increased levels of fat, sodium, and sugar.⁵² Some of these studies directly research the impact of prepared meals on children, such as one study that found high levels of sugar across both regular and healthy versions of kids' meals.⁵³ The rise of an academic focus on health impacts related to prepared meals is mirrored by a public shift in concern to health as well. In response to adults wanting more filling meals from Swanson, R. Gordon McGovern, president of the Campbell Soup Company explicitly called Swanson's TV Dinners "junk food" to convince them that the smaller portions and less satisfying vegetables in TV Dinners were justified.⁵⁴ As the president of Campbell's, R. Gordon McGovern would be the last person to point out the "junk" in their TV dinners but was forced to by the public. Overall, people have generally viewed prepared meals as "less than" fresh foods.⁵⁵ This displays a distinct change in how prepared meals were viewed: the belief

⁵¹ Ibid., 26.

⁵² Charlene Elliott, "Packaging Health: Examining 'Better-for-You' Foods Targeted at Children," *Canadian Public Policy / Analyse de Politiques* 38, no. 2 (2012): 265–81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41756757>.

⁵³ Simon Howard, Jean Adams, and Martin White, "Nutritional Content of Supermarket Ready Meals and Recipes by Television Chefs in the United Kingdom: Cross Sectional Study," *BMJ* 345 (December 17, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.e7607>.

⁵⁴ Pamela G. Hollie, "Straining To Be More Than Just Soup," *The New York Times*, March 20, 1983.

⁵⁵ Alan Warde, "Convenience Food: Space and Timing," *British Food Journal* 101, no. 7 (January 1999): pp. 518-527, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00070709910279018>, 519.

that the nutritional quality of prepared meals was equal to fresh meals had shifted to a belief that prepared meals were still meals, but nutritionally inferior due to high levels of fat, sugar, and sodium along with intense processing that went into their production.

The public perception of prepared meals can also be seen through art and literature that portray prepared meals. For example, Robert Heinecken's *T.V. Dinner* portrays an aluminum TV dinner, but with food swapped for rocks covered in cigarette butts.⁵⁶ Heinecken's portrayal of the TV dinner was part of a collection of photos criticizing mass media and commercialism that had grown to be part of US culture in the latter half of the twentieth century. Through *T.V. Dinner*, Heinecken criticizes both the cultural impact of TV Dinners, arguing that they encouraged the growth of mass media and commercialism by bringing more Americans to the television and implicitly displays a view that TV Dinners are not *real* food, portraying what would normally be dessert and a meal with wholly inedible garbage. Photography was also employed by M.C. Wilkerson in his *American Dream* postcard series to portray mass production and industry as part of the American dream. Wilkerson's image is of a grocery store shelf covered in Swanson TV Dinners with prices as low as 69 cents (about \$2.33 in 2022). This photo echoes sentiments of mechanization and surplus, with shelves almost overflowing with meals. The back of the postcard reads "Frozen TV dinners provide quick, filling and possibly nutritious meals."⁵⁷ Wilkerson's writing reads with a slight sense of sarcasm, clearly criticizing the lack of nutritional content in Swanson TV dinners. However, it still argues that they have an important role in

⁵⁶ Robert Heinecken, *T.V. Dinner*, Images, n.d. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.17422247>.

⁵⁷ M.C. Wilkerson, *American Dream: Frozen TV Dinners: Det.: Front*, Images, n.d. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13878676>. ; M.C. Wilkerson, *American Dream: Frozen TV Dinners: Det.: Back*, Images, n.d. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13887932>.

American culture, being deemed part of the American dream and being quick and filling, which are their primary advertised goals.

Similar sentiments can be seen in literature such as in “Grocery List”, a short story describing Rick Moody’s trip through a grocery store and his inner monologue as he collects items for his family. He describes Lunchables as “newfangled branding terminology” entering the culinary canon, repeating the term 35 times to practice.⁵⁸ After a brief discussion about the nomenclature of bologna (or baloney), Lunchables are jokingly said to be indestructible, most likely referring to their processed nature.⁵⁹ Moody’s philosophical ramblings about the ingredients and types of Lunchables reveal the product as unfamiliar territory for consumers and as not “real” food revealed by their ability to withstand a bombing. Such art and literature serve as commentary on the growth of prepared meals as an industry, commentating on, and often criticizing, their relationship to media and to a growing theme of processing within food. These criticisms, such as those by Heineken and Moody, are often satirical, making fun of prepared meals and in doing so, outing them as overly processed and harming American society.

Actions taken by prepared meal companies reveal a back-and-forth relationship, with the public taking issue with products and companies adapting their product to be, or at least appear, healthier. In response to declining sales, brand recognizability, and market share, Swanson incorporated significant changes to its line of TV dinners reported to be “lost in a time warp.” Most notably, the company revamped its line of fried chicken dinners after being told their chicken pieces were unrecognizable.⁶⁰ There has been a struggle, as seen through

⁵⁸ Rick Moody, “Grocery List,” *Salmagundi*, no. 148/149 (2005): 155–64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40549744>, 156.

⁵⁹ Moody, “Grocery List,” 157.

⁶⁰ Constance L. Hays, “A Makeover for the TV Dinner: Swanson Is Being Upgraded to Restore Market Share,” *The New York Times*, July 25th, 1998.

Swanson's unrecognizable chicken, between companies taking advantage of economies of scale through mechanization and consumers who desire clean, "real," food. This struggle forms the basis of most conflicts between prepared meal producers and consumers. In order to keep costs down but still turn a profit, automated cooking processes have been employed by corporations to attain lower per-unit costs. However, this comes at the expense of the health content and enjoyability of such meals. Similar complaints have been levied on Stouffer's, who were found to have falsely advertised on Lean Cuisine entrees, advertising that all Lean Cuisine meals contained less than one gram of sodium. While the meals did contain the advertised maximum of sodium, the FTC found that Stouffer's had misrepresented the healthiness of Lean Cuisine meals because sodium was typically measured in milligrams, not grams.⁶¹ The case of *FTC vs. Stouffer's Food Company* further reveals the importance of advertising in the history of prepared meals, especially when discussing the relationship between corporations and consumers of prepared meals. Conflicts between these consumers and Swanson and Stouffers among other corporations indicate a damaged perception of prepared meals by the public due to both a lack of healthy meals and through shady business actions to lower costs, boost revenue, and up production.

Media Consumption

An important factor to analyze when discussing the history of prepared meals is the growth of mass media in the United States, specifically regarding the growth of in-home entertainment, namely television. Between 1950 and 1960, the percentage of households in the US owning a TV grew from 9

⁶¹ J. Craig Andrews and Thomas J. Maronick, "Advertising Research Issues from FTC versus Stouffer Foods Corporation," *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 14, no. 2 (1995): pp. 301-309, <https://doi.org/10.1177/074391569501400211>, 302.

percent to 87.1 percent.⁶² This astonishing growth parallels the growth of the prepared food industry, with Swanson's TV Dinner debuting in 1954 in the middle of this mass expansion of home entertainment. The relationship between television and prepared meals has historically been mainly mutualistic: entertaining television programs during the early evening ignited a desire to eat in front of a TV, and the TV dinner gave families the method to do so.

While Swanson has since dropped the "TV Dinner" mantra from their ready-made meal lines, the term has entered the American cultural canon becoming a blanket term for any ready-made meal served in a tray. From the beginning, Swanson's TV Dinner tied prepared meals to television by combining both convenience and entertainment. Through clever marketing, Swanson took advantage of the growing television industry. Marketing the TV Dinner as a "TV" dinner was a direct strategic choice by the Swanson corporation to boost sales. As a convenient and at the time "futuristic" product, Swanson successfully associated their product with the new technology also making its way into American homes.⁶³ TV Dinners were advertised as a way to eat dinner with your family but still catch a show. As weekly television programs rose in popularity throughout the 1950s, 60s, and further, Swanson's dinners followed the same trajectory. Advertisements from Swanson directly show families gathering around the TV to enjoy Swanson's TV dinners and the "early, early show."⁶⁴ This indicates that the connection made between TV and TV Dinners

⁶² TV History, "Number of TV Households in America 1950-1978," The American Century, accessed November 26, 2021, <https://americancentury.omeka.wlu.edu/items/show/136>.

⁶³ Jamie Horwitz, "Eating at the Edge," *Gastronomica* 9, no. 3 (2009): 42-47, <https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2009.9.3.42>, 44.

⁶⁴ "How to Catch the Early, Early Show With An Easy, Easy Dinner," Digital image, "Sept. 10: Swanson introduces the 'TV dinner' in 1953," 10 September, 2013. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/blogs/spaces/sept-10-swanson-introduces-tv-dinner-1953-172449265.html>

was not an accidental one but rather a deliberate and extremely successful piggybacking on the growing success of television.

The impact that prepared meals had on the television industry can similarly be seen through other consumer technologies that emerged to supplement home entertainment. The clearest example of such a product are TV trays, meant to give families a table to eat off while sitting on a couch. These products were so successful that they eventually made their way to the White House, with the Reagans using TV trays to watch TV while eating.⁶⁵ Like TV Dinners, TV trays enhanced the futuristic nature of prepared meals in their early days. In an article in *Gastronomica*, Jamie Horwitz recalls being “dazzled by the tv dinner on a tray table.”⁶⁶ It is important to note that these trays were not created *for* prepared meals. However, TV trays only strengthened the connection between TV Dinners and eating in front of a television. By providing an easier way to enjoy prepared meals outside of a “proper” dining environment, TV trays served as the bridge that fully covered the divide between meals and entertainment at home.

Eating while watching TV gave a new dynamic to family lives and family interactions during meals. The TV dinner was the first meal that was explicitly advertised to be eaten in front of a screen, which had significant impacts on how families ate dinner. The study of meal dynamics has grown as the ways families eat together have changed, specifically as screens became fused with eating through developments begun by prepared meals. Studies relating to the relationship between meal dynamics and media primarily focus on the negative impacts of media usage during meals, pointing out the “deleterious outcomes” of TV during dinner, specifically on children who, as

⁶⁵ Photograph of The Reagans eating on TV trays in the White House residence, 11/6/1981, Reagan White House Photographs, 1/20/1981 - 1/20/1989, Ronald Reagan Library, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/198525>.

⁶⁶ Horwitz, “Eating at the Edge”, 44.

established, are a major sect of prepared meal consumers.⁶⁷ The existence of these studies indicate the importance of media and pop culture's relationship to food studies.

Prepared meals have fundamentally shifted the way Americans interact with pop culture and screen media, especially regarding television. By providing an easy way for families to gather around the newfangled television with a futuristic meal, prepared meals indelibly tied themselves to screens in a way that would propel them into the American food cultural canon. TV Dinners have become so ingrained in entertainment history in the United States that technology has adapted to further connect the two in the form of TV trays. As prepared meals grew, families eating in front of the TV grew with them, leading to academia taking hold and studying the impacts of such on children's and family health. Overall, the relationship between TV and prepared meals serves as one of the most important chapters in the history of ready-made meals, being one of the most effective marketing methods for prepared meals and becoming an incredibly close partnering technology.

Conclusion

Since their entry into American households in the early 1950s, ready-made meals have been the most important culinary source of cultural, entertainment, and domestic change. Prepared meals have driven change in how Americans interact with their food on a fundamental level by introducing new methods of quick cooking and being one of the first additions of the new genre of convenience foods. Through clever marketing, prepared meals established themselves as the food of the future

⁶⁷Amanda C. Trofholz, Allan D. Tate, Michael H. Miner, and Jerica M. Berge, "Associations between TV Viewing at Family Meals and the Emotional Atmosphere of the Meal, Meal Healthfulness, Child Dietary Intake, and Child Weight Status," *Appetite* 108 (January 1, 2017): 361–66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2016.10.018>. ; Roma Jusienė et al., "Screen Use During Meals", 688.

and as a cheap, quick solution to preparing dinner for busy families. As a new domestic technology, prepared meals similarly had a significant impact on the roles and lives of women, with frozen foods being of interest to housewives of the time. Later in the century, children became a notable target of meal producers looking to capitalize on busy families looking to feed hungry children, a shift that would impact much of the public views on ready-made meals. The public has had a rocky relationship with the ready-made meal. Between issues over technology making their way into food, health concerns, and business troubles, the public has always had a voice regarding their meals. Perhaps the largest impact of ready-made meals has been on the entertainment industry, with TV dinners becoming an eponym for prepared meals at large.

The inevitable question that follows an investigation of the impacts meals of this nature have had so far is what comes next? As tastes and audiences have changed, so have prepared meals. Present-day ready-made meals focus on two primary audiences: children, a continuity from the twentieth century, and young adults, a new audience that have embraced meals specifically built for the microwave. This is especially evident with the growth of the line of meals produced by Trader Joes and by a number of fast food chains breaking into the prepared meal market. These products provide fast and more importantly cheap meals for college students and recent graduates who need quick eats. Another relationship between people and food to observe in the future is the relationship between ready-made meals and health. As the United States continues to face an obesity crisis among its citizens, the public view of processed foods and specifically processed meals will be incredibly important. Companies have already addressed growing health concerns by releasing health-focused lines like Lean Cuisine, but as we have seen, these have issues of their own.

The study of the history of prepared meals relates to studies of American culture, society, economics, and entertainment. By studying these meals, historians can have a deep look into how food has shaped Americans' relationship to their food beyond the plates themselves but also to their families, their homes, and their technology. Ready-made meals, though just one subset of a myriad different types of food and even convenience foods, have had a profound impact on the United States that will continue to resonate for years to come.