Q 27: Which Is the Best Luncheon Meat Package?

A 27: A large variety of processed meat products are sold under the collective name of “luncheon meat.” A good portion of luncheon meats are sold prepackaged in the supermarket. This is not meant to deprecate the more traditional sale at the local deli or the growing activity at the supermarket deli counter. The consumer very often prefers to have bologna sliced specifically for his (or her) demand. It must be realized that both modes of marketing will survive for some time and actually compliment one another.

The prepackaged luncheon meat fits the modern system of retailing. If pickles, ketchup and mustard are readily available to the consumer on the open shelf, why not the processed meat as well? Both products and package have severe traditional limitations imposed on them. Bologna is by tradition round, and no one would dare make a square bologna, for example. Thus one is constricted by past usage to a limited number of shapes and sizes.

The 8 oz. package seems most popular. Recent attempts at introducing 2 oz. packages geared to the needs of the “singles” trade has met with little success. At the other end of the size spectrum, we find a limited market for the 16 oz. package. Other sizes such as 4, 6, and 12 oz. enjoy a portion of the existing market.

THE MACHINE

In spite of the large variety of packages in current use, there are certain common features applicable to all luncheon meat packages. They are all vacuum packages formed on a flatbed machine. The most popular machines include Mahaffy-Harder, Royal Vac, and Multi Vac. Not all of the
aforementioned are capable of producing all of the packages described herein.

Each machine has its limitations and represents a compromise between cost and various capabilities. The meat packer must decide, on the basis of his own priorities, the selection which best meets his specific needs.

Some limited quantity of luncheon meat is still provided in a premade pouch (as distinct from roll stock). This is a mode of packaging utilized by packers of limited volume or specialty products. Pouches were traditionally cellophane/polyethylene. The cellophane provided a glasslike appearance, an excellently printable surface, and a degree of stiffness most desirable for shelf display. Normally the pouched luncheon meat was packaged under gas. There is a trend away from the pouch to roll stock. Those who continue in pouches are giving serious thought to plastics, such as polyester, Nylon, and polypropylene to replace the costlier cellophane. However, ecology considerations have given cellophane a new chance (see Q 24).

THE ALL-FLEXIBLE PACK

The least expensive roll stock package is produced from a composite consisting of nylon/polyethylene as a thermoformable web and polyester/polyethylene as an unformed web. Gauges employed depend on depth of draw (4 oz. versus 16 oz.), type of product (with or without casing, for example), shipping radius, etc. For especially difficult circumstances substitution of ionomer as sealant is considered by some to be beneficial.

SEMI-RIGID

The concept of placing luncheon meat into a transparent rigid tray was originated by Oscar Mayer and has since been imitated by every major national and regional meat packer. Formerly, PVC with or without sealants (PE, EVA, or ionomer) was utilized. In the mid-1970s the FDA threatened to ban the use of PVC and a flurry of activity to replace same ensued. At this writing, several plastics are jockeying for position with no clear-cut favorite emerging (Table 27-1).

The lidding material, in most instances, is colored. The preferred color is yellow, but orange, red, and other colors are in use as well. The composite is 50 ga. oriented polyester with 2 or 3 mils of a sealant. A formable polyester is employed for machines that have back forming capabilities. In such instances, the rigid tray has a slightly larger than required depth. The lidding material is drawn into the void upon evacuation, giving the package a countersunk appearance.

The semi-rigid package is normally provided with a header. A center hole