

## Consumer quest for 'quick-fix' dinners boosts markets

Sandra Pedicini | Sentinel Staff Writer

April 13, 2009

Avoiding restaurants but unwilling to do more cooking, budget-conscious Americans are shelling out more money to supermarkets and discount stores for prepared meals.

Many companies have responded by offering an increasingly wide array of such dishes, sometimes in expanded deli sections. It's part of a trend that has helped increase sales at grocery stores in general.

And it's not just rotisserie chickens anymore. Consumers can pick up Asian dishes, soups, refrigerated pizzas and fried fish.

According to a 2008 study by food-industry consulting firm Technomic, 25 percent of consumers reported buying more prepared meals than they did a year ago. Sales are expected to keep growing as grocers continue innovating and improving their prepared items, said Sara Monnette, who helped write Technomic's report.

"It's the quick fix," said Daisy Sanchez, a sporting-goods department manager at Walmart, who was picking up garlic-and-lemon-pepper rotisserie chickens from her employer's deli after work. "It's just one, two, three."

Sanchez, 47, says she and her family eat ready-made meals about once a week, "when I'm tired."

The Walmart on Turkey Lake Road, where Sanchez works, has seen a higher demand for prepared items during the past few months, assistant store manager Greg Getz said. As a result, more refrigerated meals are out on the shelves, and the store hired an employee specifically to assemble sub sandwiches. Some newer supermarkets have devoted huge sections of their stores to items requiring minimal or no preparation. Technomic calls it the "Whole Foods effect" — a reference to the upscale grocery chain.

A Whole Foods Market that opened last year in the Dr. Phillips area has hot bars with Asian, Indian, Latin, Italian, continental and American-style foods. Its offerings also include a pizza bar and three self-service soup bars.

The store has expanded its sandwich station because of heavy demand, particularly from tourists.

Even before that, Publix opened a pilot store in Lake Mary with 4,500 square feet devoted to items such as Asian dishes, slow-cooked meats and soups. A salad bar is set to open in July.

And a recently remodeled Winn-Dixie store in Casselberry has a deli that includes a sandwich and sub shop, salad bar, gourmet olive cart, wood-burning rotisserie and wing bar.

All of this has helped grocery-store sales, which increased 6.75 percent in 2008 compared with the previous year, according to Sageworks Inc., which provides financial analyses for companies.

Some of the prepared items might cost more than making dishes yourself. But even during a recession, many people simply don't want to cook, said Harry Balzer, chief industry analyst and vice president of research firm The NPD Group.

"I can't find more people who are looking to cook more," he said.

NPD said in its recent report on the trend that the supermarket industry can lure diners in several ways, including offering discounts and drive-throughs.

Restaurants have taken notice and are fighting back.

"I think it's a concern, and rightly so," said Pamela Parseghian, executive food editor of *Nation's Restaurant News*, who moderated a panel discussion on the topic at an industry event last year.

"The prepared food you can get at a supermarket at a fraction of the price can be quite good and convenient."

Restaurants are offering more prepared meals of their own, although they often sell theirs in grocery-store frozen-food aisles or in meal kits requiring some prep time. Last year, TGI Friday's started offering frozen skillet meals, allowing people to cook dishes such as firecracker sesame chicken in less than 15 minutes.

Parseghian said restaurants are also trying to improve their takeout offerings, working on packaging so meals hold up better during long rides home and trying to offer items that can easily be reheated.

But they also need to promote what makes a night out at a restaurant special, Parseghian said. They're not just providing a plate of food.

"They're able to serve it in a lovely atmosphere, at the right temperature, the right texture and flavor," she said. "And then the other little side benefit is, people don't have to clean up after."