



The Perfect Pour

New aseptic packaging innovations offer safety, quality and space savings in established and up-and-coming foodservice operations. Greg Abbott of International Dispensing Corp. reviews the benefits of this packaging in the foodservice industry. (By Greg Abbott)

Coffee drinking has long been an American pastime. Throughout much of the 20th century, a morning view wouldn't be complete without a hot cup of joe steaming on the kitchen table.

Over the past decade, coffee consumption has exploded — a growth fueled largely by the rise of the coffee shop. In 1997, there were approximately 2,400 coffee shops in the U.S.; by mid-2006, that number had grown to more than 23,000. Coffee in America is big business, and that was before McDonald's decided to enter the picture.

While sales and marketing strategists point to the branding prowess of industry leaders like Starbucks and consumers' love of the coffee shop experience, purists

argue that the industry's phenomenal growth can be attributed to something far more basic — the coffee. High quality coffee and delicious coffee-based products are, and will continue to be, the foundations of these coffee empires.

Like any foodservice business, coffee stores both large and small have challenges. Brewing coffee and tea can be time intensive and large-batch brewing and preparation can lead to inconsistent flavor. Chai and other bulk-refrigerated items can take up valuable cooler space. Dairy condiment bars featuring carafes and pitchers for consumers, often left out all day, pose serious health safety issues, particularly when busy employees take shortcuts from the prescribed in-store operating procedures.

Packaging innovations have emerged that solve many of these problems. New multi-serve aseptic packaging with dispensing capability is at the top of the list of these solutions. Because aseptic packaging does not need refrigeration, it allows store operators to save valuable counter and cooler space. In addition, the multi-serve aseptic package signals improvements in safety, efficiency and product consistency, giving storeowners competitive advantages.

Aseptic Comes to America

Aseptically processed foods and beverages have been available to U.S. consumers for more than 25 years and in wider use overseas for even longer. Globally, aseptic packaging sales are approaching 150 billion annual units representing an astonishing 25 packages per person per year.

Still, the U.S. market has been slow to adopt aseptic packaging. While Americans have embraced juice boxes and grown accustomed to buying shelf-stable soy milk and cooking stocks, deeply ingrained consumer beliefs about refrigeration and safety and an infrastructure known for its resistance to change and innovation have, until recently, kept aseptic from making the same impact here as in the rest of the world.

But now, after years of incremental growth, aseptic packaging in the U.S. is taking off. A wide variety of products — chief among them dairy-based coffee drinks, iced teas and organic juices — are sprouting on grocery shelves. Aseptic is quickly becoming one of the most dynam-



ic and promising packaging segments in the liquid food and beverage industries.

In addition, new technology has become available to expand the reach of aseptic into multi-serve packages, making them the ideal bulk packaging choice for coffee and tea themed food-service operations.

Why Aseptic?

Aseptic represents a major advance over alternative forms of sterilization and shelf-stability. It allows perishable items to be shipped and stored without refrigeration, saving costs through every step of the supply chain. Aseptic also provides consumers a higher quality and better tasting product than conventional bottling and canning. In terms of health and wellness, aseptic generally retains a third more vitamins and nutrients than the “old” canning and bottling technologies.

These attributes are attractive to any brand or storeowner and can be clearly explained to the consumer. But just how does it work?

The proof is in the processing: filling a sterilized package with a sterile food product within the confines of a sterile environment. Not only can aseptic products be stored on the store or grocery shelf, in the home, or in restaurant kitchens at room temperature, they afford superior product integrity and require no preservatives.

Retort canning typically requires products to be heated in the container for 20 to 50 minutes. Hot-fill bottling uses the heat of the product to sterilize both the product and package, a process taking one to three minutes for heating and another seven to 15 minutes for cooling. Both processes essentially “cook out” many of the product’s original vitamins and nutrients.

In contrast, aseptically processed products are sterilized prior to packaging, using an ultra-high temperature process that rapidly heats then cools the product before filling. The processing equipment allows time (generally three to 15 seconds) and temperature (195° to 285°F) to be tailored to put the least amount of thermal stress on the product, while

ensuring safety. This flash-heating-and-cooling is a far gentler process, which is why aseptic products retain more nutritional value, exhibit more natural texture, color and taste and consume less energy than their canned and bottled counterparts—a win-win-win for the consumer.



The Boutique Boom

Local health food stores and specialty food and drink boutiques like coffee shops were the first to adopt aseptic packaging in the U.S. in the 1970s. These pioneers embraced single-serve aseptic packaging long before “nutrition,” “organic” and “green” became mainstream causes and catch words.

For many of these mom-and-pop outlets, space was a major factor in the decision to carry a product. Their lack of refrigeration capacity made shelf-stable packages an obvious choice.

From these early adopters, organic soy milk and juice were the first aseptic items to gain wider popularity during the early 1990s. Today, these products remain prominent on grocery store shelves, while being joined by a host of new categories.

Growth Trends Point to Aseptic

Among the fastest growing trends over the past 10 years has been the demand for health and wellness lifestyles and products. Americans are concerned about

nutrition and are willing to spend the money to ensure that what they eat and drink is healthy and great tasting. Organic, a category that perfectly exemplifies this trend, has exploded into a \$35 billion global industry and its 10% annual growth rate suggests its growth is far from leveling off.

With consumers better educated about health and wellness issues, and pickier about labels, brand owners must either respond or lose out to newer, trendy competitors.

The success of Whole Foods is one example of this principle in action and of consumers’ willingness to pay more for quality. To underscore this point, a 2006 study conducted by TetraPak, a large packager of single-serve aseptic beverages, cited the three most important deliverables that consumers want in the packaging of the food they buy: protection from spoilage before and after opening, taste and product integrity and safety barriers that eliminate the need for preservatives. In other words, quality and safety remain the key ingredients to successful packaging and product marketing.

Consumers are also becoming more environmentally conscious, and companies, in turn, are scrambling to become “green.” Wal-Mart’s Sustainability Scorecard, which evaluates vendors and suppliers across the supply chain based on a variety of green indicators, is but one example. But in boardrooms, marketing departments and packaging conferences around the world, “sustainability” is on everyone’s lips. With refrigeration and cooling systems accounting for 6% of the world’s carbon footprint, aseptic packaging is already making an ecological contribution and promises to save even more energy as new bulk packaging innovations gain market acceptance.

No Longer Just Single-Serve

The booming aseptic ready-to-drink market is a result of America’s on-the-go lifestyle and our desire for healthier snacks and beverages. Work, family and personal time all compete for the same 24 hours, and aseptic offers consumers convenience, safety and

Aseptic Packaging

nutrition in an easy-to-carry package.

However, with Americans spending more than 50 cents of every food dollar on food consumed and/or prepared away from home, it is imperative that the aseptic industry finds solutions that are more foodservice-friendly than traditional brick packages and pouches. Until recently, once an aseptic package was opened, the contents had to be used immediately, and aseptic packages came in single serve quantities. Now, new dispensing technology makes it possible to retain sterility in larger, three to 20-liter aseptic packages.

For the coffee shop — especially the one which sells at least as much milk-based coffees and chai drinks as coffee — the ramifications of this innovation are far-reaching. A closed, multi-serve aseptic package with dispensing capability not only improves sanitation, but enhances product consistency, improves in-store productivity and makes the barista’s life considerably easier. Labor-

intensive “frappaccino” beverages no longer need to be mixed by hand and refrigerated overnight. Chai tea mixes can also be stored outside of the refrigerator. Even milk and half-and-half can be kept out for days and weeks without risk.

Right Time, Right Now

It seems that everyone wants to be in the coffee business these days. Dunkin’ Donuts is now known at least as much for its coffee as its doughnuts. Starbucks has recently undergone a major reorganization with a focus on “innovation.” And McDonald’s recent push into the premium coffee market (complete with the inclusion of baristas in its stores) demonstrates the growth of coffee consumption is far from over.

Innovation is where the coffee wars will be won or lost, and the multi-serve aseptic package is poised to play a major role in both cost cutting and product quality. The ability to eliminate refrigeration throughout the supply chain can result in significant energy savings. The ability to simplify and

reduce in-store handling is sure to make a dent in a store’s soft costs. Additionally, the time is near when coffee chains will buy aseptic milk from a handful of processors rather than from a myriad of dairies, leveraging their dairy purchases to create lower raw material costs and a more efficient, consolidated procurement system.

A resource-conscious new generation, poised for change and willing to adopt new habits to fit the times has grown comfortable with shelf-stable flexible packages and with new technology in general.

Aseptic has arrived and is here to stay. Whether in single-serve or multi-serve, retail or foodservice, aseptic offers quality, safety and space savings unlike any packaging solution on the market. 7

Greg Abbott is founder and chairman of International Dispensing Corporation (IDC). IDC is a research and development company that develops, manufactures and licenses dispensing solutions for the packaging and food-service industries. www.idcdispensing.com.

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