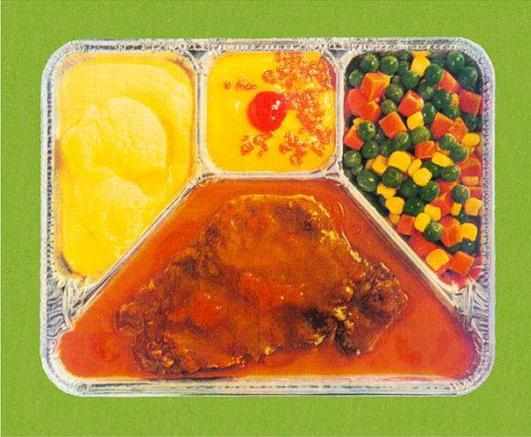


History of the TV Dinner



In 1925, the Brooklyn-born entrepreneur Clarence Birdseye invented a machine for freezing packaged fish that would revolutionize the storage and preparation of food. Maxson Food Systems of Long Island used Birdseye's technology, the double-belt freezer, to sell the first complete frozen dinners to airlines in 1945. Ultimately, it was the Swanson company that transformed how Americans ate dinner (and lunch)—and it all came about, the story goes, because of Thanksgiving turkey.

According to the most widely accepted account, a Swanson salesman named Gerry Thomas conceived the company's frozen dinners in late 1953 when he saw that the company had 260 tons of frozen turkey left over after Thanksgiving, sitting in ten refrigerated railroad cars. Thomas had the idea to add other holiday staples such as cornbread stuffing and sweet potatoes, and to serve them alongside the bird in frozen, partitioned aluminum trays designed to be heated in the oven.

The Swanson company has offered different accounts of this history. Cronin has said that Gilbert and Clarke Swanson, sons of company founder Carl Swanson, came up with the idea for the frozen-meal-on-a-tray, and Clarke Swanson's heirs, in turn, have disputed Thomas' claim that he invented it. Whoever provided the spark, this new American convenience was a commercial triumph. In 1954, the first full year of production, Swanson sold ten million trays. Banquet Foods and Morton Frozen Foods soon brought out their own offerings, winning over more and more middle-class households across the country.

Swanson introduced America to its “TV dinner” at a time when the concept was guaranteed to be lucrative: As millions of women entered the workforce in the early 1950s, Mom was no longer always at home to cook elaborate meals—but now the question of what to eat for dinner had a prepared answer. For many families, though, TV dinners were just the ticket. Pop them in the oven, and 25 minutes later, you could have a full supper while enjoying the new national pastime: television.

The next big breakthrough came in 1986, with the Campbell Soup Company’s invention of microwave-safe trays, which cut meal preparation to mere minutes. Yet the ultimate convenience food was now too convenient for some diners, as one columnist lamented: “Progress is wonderful, but I will still miss those steaming, crinkly aluminum TV trays.”

To many Americans, the TV dinner tastes like nostalgia; to others, it still tastes like the future.