Tv Dinner Encyclopedia Article

Tv Dinner

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Tv Dinner

The original TV dinner was introduced nationally by C.A. Swanson & Sons in 1954. Clarke and Gilbert Swanson, whose father had founded the company, were responding to a new social force: television. At the time, television programming was only available three or four hours a day, so if you had a set, you watched it during those hours. Since most of the programming was on in the late afternoon and early evening, that's when people gathered around their sets. The Swansons' idea was to create a portable meal that people could carry into their living rooms to eat.

The Swanson TV dinner was the first widely available frozen dinner. The original dinner contained roast turkey, cornbread dressing and gravy, peas, and sweet potatoes in a three-compartment aluminum tray. It was packaged in a box designed to look like a television, with the food pictured inside a "screen" surrounded by what looked like a wood-grain console complete with knobs at the bottom. In 1987, Swanson's original aluminum dinner tray took its place in the Smithsonian Institution.

Swanson soon added fried chicken and roast beef dinners as well. The TV dinners were an instant success. In their first year of national distribution, 10 million dinners were sold. Today frozen dinners and entrees still comprise the largest category of frozen food, with over $4 billion in annual U.S. sales. In 1994, 382 new dinner and entree products were introduced, up nearly 50 percent from the previous year.