

Spam Turns Serious and Hormel Turns Out More

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AUSTIN, Minn. — The economy is in tatters and, for millions of people, the future is uncertain. But for some employees at the [Hormel Foods Corporation](#) plant here, times have never been better. They are working at a furious pace and piling up all the overtime they want.

The workers make Spam, perhaps the emblematic hard-times food in the American pantry.

Through war and recession, Americans have turned to the glistening canned product from Hormel as a way to save money while still putting something that resembles meat on the table. Now, in a sign of the times, it is happening again, and Hormel is cranking out as much Spam as its workers can produce.

In a factory that abuts Interstate 90, two shifts of workers have been making Spam seven days a week since July, and they have been told that the relentless work schedule will continue indefinitely.

Spam, a gelatinous 12-ounce rectangle of spiced ham and pork, may be among the world's most maligned foods, dismissed as inedible by food elites and skewered by comedians who have offered smart-alecky theories on its name (one G-rated example: *Something Posing As Meat*).

But these days, consumers are rediscovering relatively cheap foods, Spam among them. A 12-ounce can of Spam, marketed as “Crazy Tasty,” costs about \$2.40. “People are realizing it’s not that bad a product,” said Dan Johnson, 55, who operates a 70-foot-high Spam oven.

Hormel declined to cooperate with this article, but several of its workers were interviewed here recently with the help of their union, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union Local 9. Slumped in chairs at the union hall after making 149,950 cans of Spam on the day shift, several workers said they been through boom times before — but nothing like this.

Spam “seems to do well when hard times hit,” said Dan Bartel, business agent for the union local. “We’ll probably see Spam lines instead of soup lines.”

Even as consumers are cutting back on all sorts of goods, Spam is among a select group of thrifty grocery items that are selling steadily.

Pancake mixes and instant potatoes are booming. So are vitamins, fruit and vegetable preservatives and beer, according to data from October compiled by Information Resources, a market research firm.

“We’ve seen a double-digit increase in the sale of rice and beans,” said Teena Massingill, spokeswoman for the [Safeway](#) grocery chain, in an e-mail message. “They’re real belly fillers.”

[Kraft Foods](#) said recently that some of its value-oriented products like macaroni and cheese, Jell-O and Kool-Aid were experiencing robust growth. And sales are still growing, if not booming, for Velveeta, a Kraft product that bears the same passing resemblance to cheese as Spam bears to ham.

Spam holds a special place in America’s culinary history, both as a source of humor and of cheap protein during hard times.

Invented during [the Great Depression](#) by Jay Hormel, the son of the company’s founder, Spam is a combination of ham, pork, sugar, salt, water, potato starch and a “hint” of sodium nitrate “to help Spam keep its gorgeous pink color,” according to Hormel’s Web site for the product.

Because it is vacuum-sealed in a can and does not require refrigeration, Spam can last for years. Hormel says “it’s like meat with a pause button.”

During World War II, Spam became a staple for Allied troops overseas. They introduced it to local residents, and it remains popular in many parts of the world where the troops were stationed.

Spam developed a camp following in the 1970s, mainly because of Monty Python, the English comedy troupe. In a 1970 skit, a couple tried to order breakfast at a cafe featuring Spam in nearly every entree, like “Spam, Eggs, Sausage and Spam.” The diners were eventually drowned out by a group of Vikings singing, “Spam, lovely Spam, wonderful Spam.”

(Familiar with the skit, Internet pioneers labeled junk e-mail “spam” because it overwhelmed other dialogue, according to one theory.)

Here in Austin, local officials have tried to capitalize on Spam’s kitschy cultural status, even if a decidedly unpleasant odor hangs over the town (a slaughterhouse next to the Hormel plant butchers 19,000 hogs a day). Austin advertises itself as “Spamtown,” and it boasts 13 restaurants with Spam on the menu.

Jerry’s Other Place sells a Spamburger for \$6.29. Johnny’s “Spamarama” menu includes eggs Benedict with Spam for \$7.35. At Steve’s [Pizza](#), a medium Spam and pineapple pizza costs \$11.58.

“There are all kinds of people who have an emotional connection to Spam,” said Gil Gutknecht Jr., the former Minnesota congressman, who was in the gift shop at the Spam Museum buying a Spam tie, sweatshirt and earrings. Mr. Gutknecht recalled that he once served as a judge in a Spam recipe contest.

“The best thing was Spam brownies,” he said, with more or less a straight face.

No independent data provider compiles sales figures that include all the outlets where Spam is sold, including foreign stores, so it is not clear exactly how much sales are up. Hormel’s chief executive, Jeffrey M. Ettinger, said in September that they were growing by double digits.

The company would not discuss more recent sales of the product or permit a tour of the Spam factory, citing rules that Hormel said prevented it from speaking ahead of a forthcoming earnings report.

However, Hormel executives appear to be banking on the theory that Spam fits nicely into recession budgets. Workers on the Spam line in Austin — more than 40 of them work two shifts — see no signs that their work schedule will let up.

“We are scheduled to work every day except Thanksgiving and Christmas,” said Darwin Sellers, 56, a Spam “formulator” who adds salt, sugar and nitrates to batches of Spam. “Mr. Ettinger is negotiating with the man upstairs to get us to work eight days a week.”

Mr. Sellers said he had not seen much of his family in recent months, but the grueling schedule had been good for his checkbook. He bought a new television and planned to replace a 20-year-old refrigerator.

Unlike his colleagues though, he has no plans to stock up on Spam. “It’s not something I’ve ever developed a taste for,” he said.

A rising segment of the public, it seems, does have a taste for Spam, which is available in several varieties, including Spam Low Sodium, Spam with Cheese and Spam Hot & Spicy.

James Bate, a 48-year-old sausage maker, was buying it at [Wal-Mart](#) in Cleveland recently. Not only was it cheap, but he said it brought back fond memories of his grandfather’s making him Spam sandwiches.

“You can mix it with [tomatoes](#) and onions and make a good meal out of it,” he said. “A little bit of this stuff goes a long way.”

From the New York Times:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/15/business/15spam.html>