

The Shift Toward Liquid Pouches and Aseptic Cartons: The Two Fastest-Growing Formats in Modern Packaging

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The liquid-packaging industry is undergoing its biggest transformation in decades. What used to be a world dominated by rigid PET bottles, HDPE jugs, and glass containers is rapidly shifting toward two high-growth formats: **flexible liquid pouches** and **aseptic cartons**. Both formats are reshaping supply chains, retail merchandising, sustainability strategies, and consumer expectations.

For brand owners, co-packers, and retailers, understanding why these formats are accelerating—and when each is the right choice—is essential to staying ahead of the curve.

Why Liquids Are Shifting to Pouches

1. Sustainability Advantages

Liquid pouches contain **up to 70% less plastic** than rigid bottles and dramatically reduce transportation emissions due to lighter weight and better cube efficiency. They have become the preferred format for refill systems, where plastic reduction can reach **80–90%** per refill cycle.

Pouches also support retailer sustainability goals and help brands comply with evolving EPR regulations and plastic taxes.

2. Supply-Chain Cost Savings

Brands converting liquids to pouches often see:

- Lower film/material cost
- Lower freight cost (more units per pallet)
- Lower warehouse footprint
- Less breakage during shipping
- Faster line speeds with modern FFS technology

It's not unusual for companies to realize **25–40% total savings** when converting from rigid bottles to pouches.

3. Better Fit for Modern Lifestyles

Consumers prefer pouches for:

- On-the-go consumption
- Travel-sized liquids
- Easy dispensing
- Child-friendly formats
- Single-serve or controlled-portion packaging

Categories seeing the fastest transition include baby food, cold brew concentrates, purees, personal care, condiments, and home-care liquids.

4. Materials and Machinery Have Significantly Improved

Today's liquid pouches benefit from:

- High-barrier multilayer films
- Leak-proof spouts and fitments
- Stand-up stability
- Retort and hot-fill compatibility
- E-commerce durability and ISTA-tested performance

Modern pouches are no longer a compromise—they are a high-performance primary package.

The Parallel Trend: The Rise of Aseptic Cartons

Alongside pouches, **aseptic cartons** (Tetra Pak, SIG, Elopak, etc.) have become one of the fastest-growing formats for “shelf-stable” or “ambient-safe” liquids.

What once was a niche format is now mainstream for:

- Plant-based milks
- Juices
- Soups & broths
- Ready-to-drink coffees
- Nutritional beverages
- Wine, cocktails, and adult beverages
- Liquid eggs
- Water (emerging category)

Aseptic cartons allow brands to eliminate preservatives, extend shelf life, reduce cold-chain costs, and create lighter, more sustainable packaging.

Why Brands Are Switching to Aseptic Cartons

1. Long Shelf Life Without Refrigeration

This is the single largest driver.

Aseptic cartons allow products to stay shelf stable for **6–18 months** without refrigeration, reducing:

- Cold-chain logistics
- Spoilage
- Retail shrink
- Energy costs

This makes them ideal for beverages, soups, dairy alternatives, and emerging functional drinks.

2. Strong Sustainability Story

Aseptic cartons are made primarily from paper — typically **70–85% renewable fiber**. Many consumers perceive cartons as more natural, less plastic-heavy, and environmentally friendlier.

Additional advantages include:

- Lower carbon footprint
- Lightweight structure
- Retailer preference for “low-plastic” formats
- Recyclability via growing carton-collection infrastructure

For brands looking to improve sustainability scorecards, aseptic cartons score extremely well.

3. High-Quality Product Protection

Cartons offer:

- Excellent oxygen and light barriers
- Preservation of flavor and nutrients
- Minimal thermal impact compared to hot-fill bottles
- Protection from UV and oxidation

This is critical for plant milks, cold brew coffee, protein beverages, broths, and premium juices.

4. Strong Branding & Shelf Presence

Cartons offer a billboard-style printing surface with:

- Full-wrap graphics
- Matte and gloss options
- Large vertical face for retail impact
- Strong premium positioning

Consumers associate cartons with premium, minimally processed products.

Pouches vs. Aseptic Cartons: When Should Brands Choose Each?

Choose Pouches When:

- Portability and convenience matter
- The category is suited to refills or concentrates
- Cost reduction is the primary driver
- E-commerce durability is important
- Small-format or single-serve packaging is needed
- Flexibility in shape, size, and fitments is a priority

Choose Aseptic Cartons When:

- Shelf stability is critical
- Product integrity, nutrition, and freshness are priorities
- The brand wants a paper-forward sustainability story

- A premium, upright retail appearance is desired
- Cold chain removal will save significant cost
- The category fits beverage-style merchandising

Both formats can coexist in a single product line—for example:

- **Household cleaners:** Pouch refills + carton concentrates
- **Beverages:** Aseptic cartons for primary, pouches for on-the-go formats
- **Kids' products:** Cartons for home use + pouches for school/snacks
- **Soup/broth:** Cartons for retail, pouches for foodservice

A smart packaging strategy uses each format where it delivers maximum value.

Where Packaging Consultants Add Critical Value

As brands transition from rigid packaging to pouches and aseptic cartons, consultants guide them through essential decisions, including:

- **Material selection** (films, laminates, paperboard, barriers, recyclability)
- **Machinery investment** (FFS lines, spout insertion, aseptic fillers, CIP/SIP systems)
- **Co-packer identification**
- **Environmental impact modeling and EPR compliance**
- **Cost-benefit analysis**
- **SKU rationalization** and format strategy
- **Retail test planning and merchandising layouts**
- **Consumer perception research**
- **E-commerce packaging optimization**

Packaging Resources helps brands navigate these transitions with the supplier relationships, technical understanding, and manufacturing insights needed to make the right long-term choices.

Conclusion

The liquid-packaging landscape is no longer defined by rigid bottles alone. The two formats growing fastest—**flexible pouches** and **aseptic cartons**—represent a fundamental shift toward lighter, more sustainable, more efficient packaging systems.

Brands that adopt these formats now will enjoy:

- Lower supply chain costs
- Higher sustainability scores
- Better retail placement
- Reduced waste
- Stronger consumer appeal

As packaging materials, filling technology, and recycling systems continue to advance, the movement toward pouches and aseptic cartons will only accelerate.