

FOOD *ff* FOCUS

CHICKEN WINGS



AVIAN ASCENT

Photos by Getty

Chicken wing sales keep soaring.

by **Ed Finkel**,
contributing editor

Chickens might not be able to fly, but chicken wings continue to fly off the shelves and out of foodservice kitchens.

Sales of chicken wings in the refrigerated meat case rose 7.3% to \$1.8 billion for the 52 weeks ending Aug. 10. Volume sales were up a more modest 2.1% to 524.9 million pounds as prices rose 5.1% to \$3.50 per

pound. Sales in the deli case rose 6.5% to \$944.0 million, and volume rose a similar 5.3% to 122.1 million pounds as prices stayed more stable, up 1.2% to \$7.73/pound.

On the frozen side, wing sales were up 4.2% for the same 52-week period to \$767.8 million, although volume dropped 4.9% to 225.1 million pounds as prices shot up 9.5% to \$3.41 per pound.

And all-other wing processed parts leapt 17.6% in dollar sales to \$791.7 million even as volume sales slid 9.9% to 195.8 million pounds (because prices spiked 29.2% to \$4.04 per pound).

"Chicken wings are a big deal," says Chris DuBois, executive vice president and perimeter practice leader at Circana. "You think, 'Could America eat any more

chicken wings?' The answer is 'yes.' The growth at the deli prepared counter is particularly striking, he says. "That speaks to the power of making it easy and convenient," he adds. "You see younger people gravitating toward the deli prep side. Is this more likely to grow than not? The answer is 'yes.'"

Middle- and high-school students

seem to be cooking up wings as an after-school snack, particularly with the popularity of air fryers, DuBois says. "Mini-meals continue to be a place to see the frozen wings play out," he says. "Coming back from band practice or football practice, those kinds of emergency snacks can be really good."

A 2024 report from Revenue Management Solutions titled "The Chicken Chronicles: The Inside Scoop of Consumer Cravings" found Gen Z listed wings third on their chicken-type preferences, behind tenders and sandwiches, while boneless "wings" came in fourth. Older generations were less enthusiastic, with "boneless" third on millennials' list and fifth for Gen X, while actual wings were fifth for millennials and not in the top five

for their elders.

Richard Delvallee, senior vice president of consulting at RMS, says wings are increasingly viewed as a special occasion food shared among family and friends, and that bone-in wings are usually priced higher and appeal to "traditionalists" and first-wing wing eaters, while boneless offer convenience. In early 2025, offerings shifted away from boneless toward tenders and bone-in wings, he adds.

Anne-Marie Roerink, principal at 210 Analytics, notes that the meat department accounts for a little more than half of all chicken-wing sales. "Chicken wings can serve many roles, from a protein snack or lunch, to dinner and entertaining," she says, with peaks around the Super Bowl, March Madness, the Olympics

and the World Cup. "Some retailers added chicken wing bars, similar to salad or olive bars. These bars feature a variety of flavors, and in some cases, a variety of crispiness, too."

Wholesale wing prices are on "the most volatile roller-coaster price ride" of any chicken parts due to the ebb and flow of demand, while the number of chickens being slaughtered remains stable, says Tom Super, senior vice president of public affairs at the National Chicken Council. Wing prices have been below-average thus far in 2025, he says, but as of early fall, "evidence of stepped-up demand, especially at food-service, is beginning to indicate that wing prices will once again meet or even exceed the five-year average before the winter holidays season."

THE FASTEST-GROWING PREPARATION CALLOUTS PAIRED WITH CHICKEN WINGS OVER THE PAST YEAR

were glazed (up 23%), crispy (17%), bone-in (13%), breaded (11%), tender (8%) and smoked (8%).

- Technomic



FOUR IN FIVE (80%) CONSUMERS "LOVE" OR "LIKE" CHICKEN WINGS, including 84% of men, 84% of millennials and 82% of Midwesterners.

- Datassential



CHICK-FIL-A (46%), KFC (41%) AND POPEYE'S (34%) are the restaurants consumers visit most often when buying chicken products.

- Revenue Management Solutions

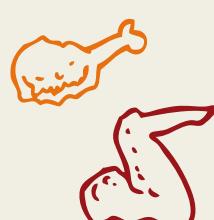


WHAT'S NEW



Marinated boldness

Rastelli Foods has rolled out a new line of 20-ounce six packs of marinated chicken wings and drumsticks in five flavorings: barbecue flavored and garlic parmesan wings; and butter, Caribbean jerk and Italian style drumsticks. The company aimed for a balance of new, bold flavors and trusted cuts, says Ray Rastelli, founder and president. "Some demographics will venture out" into less familiar marinades, he says. "Others want barbecue or garlic parmesan."



WING JOINTS STILL JUMPING

The continued upsurge in wing sales at retail has not resulted in a cannibalization of consumer enthusiasm from foodservice establishments.

Mentions of chicken wings overall on menus increased 5.9% between the second quarters of 2024 and 2025, and chicken wing entrees cost an average of \$16.41 as of Q2 2025, according to data provided by Technomic. Data from Datassential show that 42.7% of total menus offer

chicken wings – more frequently at casual dining (51.5%) and midscale (47.1%), and less often at fast casual (19.1%) and fine dining (14.2%).

Most common sauces and flavors are spicy (79.2%), barbecue (56.7%), Buffalo (47.4%) and southern (37.1%),

Datassential found, while the fastest growing over the past four years have been rum (up 642%), hot honey (435%), marinara (432%) and Nashville hot (389%). Technomic data showed that the fast-growing sauces over the past year are globally inspired or flavor fusions like honey chile sauce (up 308%), chile glaze (146%),



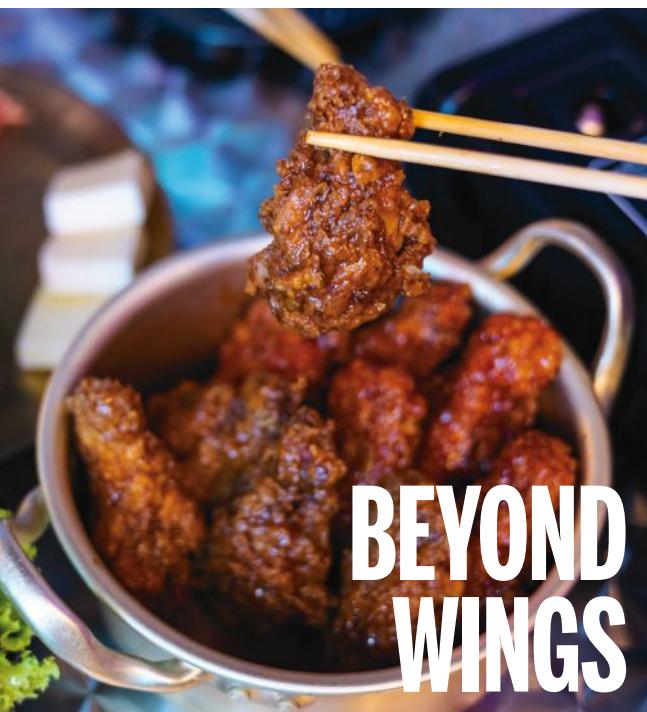
Thai chile (22%), sweet-and-sour (15%) and mango habanero (8%).

Innovative foodservice operators are linking more closely with their strategic partners to refresh wing concept offerings, according to Tom Super, senior vice president of public affairs at the National Chicken Council, adding that many are preparing

wings with a mild flavor. “To then achieve the taste and flavor preferred, operators offer a wide variety of sauces and spices,” he says. “Each wing fan can choose the sauces/spices to enjoy a more customized wing-eating experience.”

In order to compete, supermarket delis continue to overhaul and expand their spaces, while connecting

to delivery companies like Door Dash, says Chris DuBois, executive vice president and perimeter practice leader at Circana. “Whether you’re a restaurant or a supermarket, you still need to be known for something,” he says. “There’re more and more branding going into that.... Wings are going to be one of the big winners.”



Given the popularity of chicken wings, retail brands have begun stretching the concept of marinated, flavored chicken into other realms.

A test market concept that Tom Super, senior vice president of public affairs at the National Chicken Council, has seen considered combines demand for wings with that for meat sticks and jerky, using a jumbo wing drumette marinated in mild seasoning. “That favorable trend is not being lost on wing innovators who not only want to expand sales but find a niche that could reduce wing price volatility,” he says. “Key to gaining market success will be having an affordable, tasty, high-protein product with a chewable texture.”

Rastelli Foods recently rolled out a line of both wings and drumsticks in several flavors, noting that the wings category continues to grow, even with higher pricing, says Ray Rastelli, founder and president. “This time of year, especially because of the sports season we’re in ... we see it in our own retail stores: Wings lead the pack,” he says. “What led us to part of our ideation is that you can go to the retail case and buy fresh wings all day long, or you can go to the deli section and buy fully cooked, prepared wings. In the middle is where our marinated wings sit.”

In a similar vein, Conagra Brands has partnered with Buffalo Wild Wings to create Slim Jim branded chicken sticks available in Buffalo style and hot sauces, taking inspiration from two of Buffalo Wild Wings’ top-selling sauces. Marketed with on-the-go snacking, lunch boxes and road trip in mind, they weigh just under an ounce and feature six grams of protein per stick. These began rolling out to convenience stores nationwide in September.



SPICES, RUBS AND SAUCES

Chicken wings would be a considerably less distinct category without its signature spices, rubs and sauces, beginning with the Buffalo sauce developed by Anchor Bar more than 40 years ago and continuing with new variations with each passing year.

It's important that retailers cross-merchandise wings with sauces and spices to fully take advantage of the opportunities the category provides, says Anne-Marie Roerink, principal at 210 Analytics. "Marinades and sauces are a huge trend among

Gen Z, and a great way to introduce these younger consumers to flavor variety," she says.

Richard Delvallee, senior vice president of consulting at Revenue Management Solutions, says foodservice operators introduce new flavors to both attract new

customer segments and increase dining frequency among existing guests. He notes that dry rubs have gained popularity because they're seen as healthier and more cost-effective.

Buffalo sauce remains popular at retail and continues to grow quickly, up 7% in the past year, while bourbon has risen by 29%, according to Chris DuBois, executive vice present and perimeter practice leader at Circana. "Cajun has been making a big run," he says. "Honey has been strong as well – anything that honey touches tends to do well. Bourbon-Buffalo combinations tend to be powering a lot in chicken."

Aside from Buffalo and bourbon, hot honey barbecue and garlic parmesan are among the most popular, says Ray Rastelli, president and founder of Rastelli Foods, which has added Indian-style butter, Caribbean jerk and Italian SKUs. "We still haven't gone too far outside the box," he says. "We think that more traditional shopper is looking at these as a solution."



TRUE OR FALSE

55.8%
of respondents said the answer was false.

• THE ANSWER: **False** •

'MORE OF A FUN CATEGORY'

While chicken breast and whole chicken packages tend to be replete with health-related claims, wings are mostly about flavor, according to Chris DuBois, executive vice president and perimeter practice leader at Circana.

"Wings are more of a fun category," he says. "Sort of like pork ribs, it's one of the last places you'll see 'antibiotic-free' or 'organic.' Not that people aren't concerned, but they're more looking at flavor and making that dish they want to make."

Some brands see claims as a way to make a connection with wing consumers nonetheless. Pasturebird, which has seen a 20% increase in retail sales since the spring, has "witnessed a large portion of consumers seeking pasture-raised, non-GMO and certified glyphosate-free alongside the typical antibiotic-free," says Meredith Cochran, director of marketing and development.

Rastelli Foods focuses on having as clean an ingredient deck as possible, starting with an air-chilled, whole natural



chicken, says Ray Rastelli, founder and president. The company also uses water-based rather than oil-based marinades with a short list of ingredients. "Our customers do look at that – not all, but some," he says. "We wanted to make sure we passed that test for whoever picked up that product."

Wings and drumsticks are more economical than boneless breast or chicken strips, which solves some customers' budget constraints while also ensuring full carcass utilization, Rastelli says. "It gives us a much better opportunity to round out the entire offering with a price point that's more attractive," he says. "The key is understanding what customers' needs are."

The "Lapse of Funding Plan," published Sept. 30 on the eve of the budget shutdown, indicated that about 42,256 of the USDA's total workforce of 85,907 were "expected to be furloughed," or about 49.2%. However, the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) was keeping its meat establishment inspector, laboratory testing staff and other essential workers on the job, with only 7% of its staff – 533 of 7,614 people – to be idled.