

FOOD *ff* FOCUS

MEAT SNACKS

Photos by Getty

SNACK *to* REALITY

Meat snackers taper their indulgence.

by **Ed Finkel**,
contributing editor

The upward momentum the meat snack category enjoyed during the COVID-19 pandemic has leveled off in the past year as people have begun to return to their normal lives.

“Dollars are flat, and there is some unit and volume pressure,” says Anne-Marie Roerink, principal at 210 Analytics. “Meat snacks have been a stellar performer for nearly 10 years, so the growth was bound to slow

down at some point, and today’s pressure on income seems to influence that.”

Dollar sales in the dried meat snacks category fell modestly for the 52 weeks ending Aug. 13, down 0.4% to \$4.6 billion, according to multi-outlet data from Circana. Unit sales fell more precipitously, down 8.8% to just over 1 million (measured in UPC scans, regardless of package size), while

price per unit rose 9.2% to \$4.47.

Sales of jerky fell more than the category overall, down 5.4% to just under \$2.1 billion, with unit sales down 12.3% to 259.6 million and prices up 7.9% to \$7.99. The catch-all “all other meat snacks” subcategory fared somewhat better, with dollar sales up 4.1% to \$2.5 billion, volume sales down 7.6% to 773.5 million, and prices up 12.7% to \$3.28.

In the jerky subcategory, Jack Link’s led with \$850.6 million in sales, down 14.1% during the 52 weeks ending August 13, according to Circana. Old Trapper was a distant second at \$306.2 million (up 5.0%), followed by private label brands in the aggregate at \$242.7 million, (down 1.3%). Among all other dried meat snacks, Slim Jim’s sold \$902.7 million (up 6.6%), followed by Jack Links

at \$748.8 million (up 2.9%) and Old Wisconsin at \$179.1 million (up 2.6%).

Sales performances across various retail channels have remained similar as in the past, Roerink says, with convenience stores seeing nearly half at \$2.2 billion annually. “But they are also experiencing some declines in units and volume,” she says. Both large and small brands have seen gains, with “some up-and-comers seeing triple-digit gains with some innovative new products.”

Tom Super, senior vice president of communications at the National Chicken Council, notes that snack food in general is a creative and competitive segment, and that meat snack purveyors

have seen chicken as a promising vehicle. “Chicken’s wide and deep appeal across essentially all consumer groups makes it the first choice for taking advantage of most new snack and finger food trends,” he says, citing “continued availability, affordability, versatility and adaptability.”

Hormel Foods sees dry meat snacks as a category that has and will continue to enjoy steady sales, says Vernon Neitzell, retail brand manager. “We see dry meat snacking as a continued mega-trend growing at a double digit rate — something we are very focused on ... with products like Hormel Pepperoni Snack STIX,” he says.

While the meat snacks category

definitely got “a pretty significant bump due to the pandemic ... we are seeing some of those households dip back out and leave the category,” says Andrew Thomas, vice president of marketing for Country Archer Provisions, which has enjoyed growth of 25.1% for jerky and 29.0% for “all other meat snacks,” according to Circana. “In the face of inflation, the jerky segment was hit pretty hard. It’s a fairly expensive product as it is, with real meat and real protein, so it will be more expensive per serving compared to a protein bar, or salty snacks. It may have reached a price cliff, especially on the traditional brands. We’re seeing people buy less, or shift into [meat] sticks.”

**THE FASTEST-GROWING BRANDS IN THE
“ALL OTHER DRIED MEAT SNACKS”
SUBCATEGORY FOR THE 52 WEEKS ENDING
AUGUST 13 WERE: Sweetwood Cattle Co., up 76.1%
to \$12.1 million; No Man’s Land, up 64.3% to \$10.3
million; Chomps, up 64.2% to \$26.2 million; and
Country Archer, up 29.0% to \$13.1 million.**

— Circana

YEAR TO DATE,

meat sticks outsold jerky through Aug. 13, 2023, comprising **50.6%** of the total category, up from **43.7%** in 2022 and **43.4%** in 2021.

— SPINS data provided by Country Archer Provisions

Household penetration of beef jerky fell from 39.4% in 2021 to 35.1% year-to-date ending July 31, 2023.

— Numerator Panel data provided by Country Archer Provisions

THE FASTEST-GROWING BRANDS IN THE JERKY SUBCATEGORY FOR THE 52 WEEKS ENDING August 13 were: Country Archer, up 25.1% to nearly \$40 million in sales; Slim Jim, up 15.0% to \$19.9 million; and Wild River, up 7.5% to \$10.3 million.

— Circana



WHAT'S NEW



Single-serve MARKET

Country Archer Provisions has launched a five-count multi-pack of one-ounce bags of its original beef jerky. “The consumption frequency for this category is very high,” says Andrew Thomas, vice president of marketing. “Not everyone wants to reseal a bag, or take a big bag with them. We think a single-serving bag is a big opportunity. We think a one-ounce bag has legs in micro-markets, like the travel channel.”

A healthy BUILD



Companies that make meat snack products continue to try out new types of proteins, as well as different flavorings and seasonings.

Anne-Marie Roerink, principal at 210 Analytics, sees dried meat snacks moving beyond beef and pork to include bison, turkey and chicken, and even single-serve bacon snack-packs. Others have tried plant-based meat alternative snacks using ingredients like mushrooms “to create protein snacks that, in look and positioning, are similar to dried meat snacks,” she says.

The traditional flavors used in meat snacks include original, teriyaki, peppered, mild/hot and jalapeño flavors, while the flavors experiencing the fastest growth include mild, original, sweet chili and barbecue, says Vernon Neitzell, retail brand manager at Hormel Foods. He cites data showing that nearly half of consumers say familiar flavor is an important attribute – but nearly as many say the same about “exciting” flavors. “They still want familiar and recognizable

meats such as pepperoni, but they also want to try something new,” he says.

Consumers are “craving unique and innovative items, not me-too items. Everybody’s looking to differentiate themselves,” agrees Peter Andoni, partner and co-owner of Arkk Food Co., which has partnered with ISO Food Group to create Wahlburgers ChickenStixx. “We try to always look at things a little differently and be unique in everything we do.”

However, Andrew Thomas, vice president of marketing at Country

Archer Provisions, says he has worked in other categories that experiment more than meat snacks. “You get here, and it’s really the tried-and-true – original, teriyaki, and pepper are the biggest volume drivers,” he says. “Brands have tried to launch more niche, creative, clever flavors, and they don’t seem to stick.”

Country Archer is researching how consumers see the category, “and why do they potentially treat it differently than salty snacks, where there are a million different flavor options?”



TRUE OR FALSE

65.5%
of respondents answered “true.”

• THE ANSWER: **true** •

Retail beef, pork and chicken prices have moderated in 2023 from 2022, but 2024 will see price inflation in each one of those species. USDA projects beef prices will rise nearly 7% from 2023, given a liquidated cattle herd; pork prices will rise moderately by 1.6%, though anywhere from an 8.9% decline to a 13.7% increase is possible; and chicken price inflation will come in at a midpoint of 3.6%



INNOVATIONS ABOUND

The growth of the meat snack category over the past decade has inspired brands to find innovative new SKUs to capture consumers' palates and wallets.

ISO Food Group and Arkk Food Co. have partnered to bring to retail the Wahlburgers brand ChickenStixx product, which uses a patented technology to remove skin, fat and tendons from chicken drumsticks, says

Peter Andoni, partner and co-owner of Arkk Food Co. "This creates a new and different eating experience," he says. "It's similar to a chicken-wing drummie, but you have five to six times the meat."

To date they are unseasoned, although a few seasoned SKUs are in the R&D stage, Andoni adds. In addition to eight major retailers including Publix,

Hy-Vee, Giant Eagle and Meijer, the Stixx are being served at Buffalo Wild Wings locations in Michigan.

Niman Ranch has unveiled five charcuterie snack packs that "provide an elevated snacking solution that is great for the whole family, for after-school snacks, dorm-room bites or in-flight meals during travel," says Alicia LaPorte, communications director.

The snack pack options variously mix pepperoni, provolone, prosciutto, genoa salame, and hot sopressata.

Country Archer Provisions in July launched at Sprouts a five-count multi-pack of one-ounce bags of its original-flavored beef jerky (see What's New, p. 97), and a 16-ounce rosemary turkey version of its mini-meat sticks, says Andrew Thomas, vice presi-

dent of marketing. Lastly, in June, Country Archer rolled out in 700 to 750 Target stores a zero sugar teriyaki flavor of its grass-fed beef jerky. The brand's zero sugar classic flavor has been the fourth-best performer in the category at Target, Thomas says. "People love zero-sugar," he says. "Because it's done so well for us, it made a world of sense to launch zero-sugar teriyaki."



Companies making meat snacks for the health-conscious consumer have a variety of options, companies and industry observers say.

Alicia LaPorte, communications director at Niman Ranch, notes high-protein snacks have become more popular with consumers looking to skip chips and other carbohydrate-heavy items "to help them feel fuller, longer." She adds that "claims-based meat snack options are especially appealing, with high consumer interest in no antibiotics ever, high animal welfare certification and crate-free."

Better-for-you options attract consumers who want snacks that provide energy while staying mindful of total calorie consumption, says Vernon Neitzell, brand manager at Hormel Foods. "Consumers continue to focus on nutrition," he says. "There are consumers who really shifted focus to all organic, so we know it's important to be mindful of this demographic segment as we continue to look at additional opportunities."

Consumers are discovering, or perhaps rediscovering, that meat snacks can be good for you, says Andrew Thomas, vice president of marketing at Country Archer Provisions. "There are options not as full of preservatives and bad-quality protein as people were used to, in decades past," he says. "Zero sugar is huge. High protein is important in all food and beverage, driving a ton of growth. Most folks know that jerky and meat sticks are high in protein, but zero sugar or low sugar is something we call out, loud and proud."

As in other categories, Thomas also sees a move toward "real ingredients — ingredients that you can pronounce and don't sound overly chemical," he says. "A higher proportion [of consumers] read nutrition labels, watch their diets, seek things like grass-fed beef, and look for more premium options. It's a massive category, so the changes might not look like a lot, but from the number of consumers and households, it's pretty meaningful."