

# A Chicken On Every Plate

Delis are well positioned as the go-to option for this popular protein source

BY BOB JOHNSON

Chicken from the deli is a natural in a difficult economy. It's a familiar and comforting food for uncertain times — and few proteins fill the center of the plate more economically than chicken.

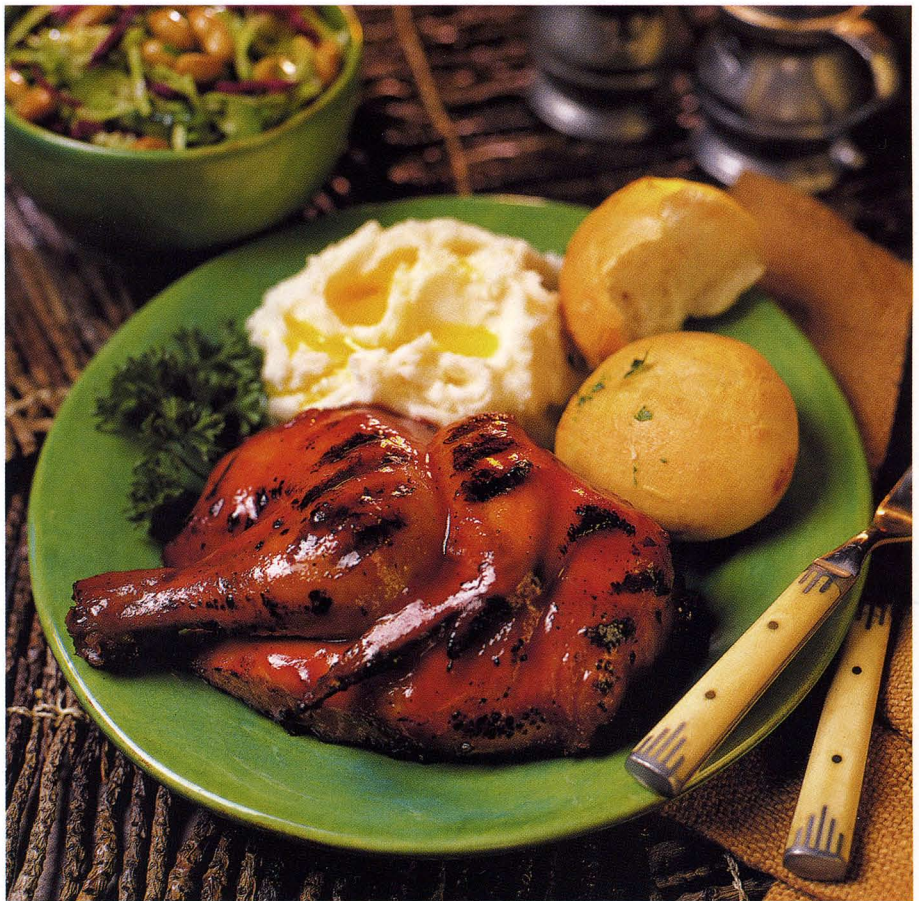
"It's probably one of the least expensive meals you can buy," according to Ed Sussman, co-owner of Merit Paper Corp. in Melville, NY. "For around the \$5.99 area, you can make a salad at home and serve three or four people."

But even in the current economy, many consumers are too busy to make that salad at home. That's where there are opportunities to fill out the rest of the meal. Delis are not just selling the chicken; they're selling entire meal choices that are affordable, convenient and delicious, adding to the total ring and making the entire package more attractive.

"Bundling is perceived as a better value," notes Andy Seymour, vice president of sales and marketing, deli and frozen food sales at Perdue Inc., Salisbury, MD. Chicken can be merchandised along with, or bundled with, fresh artisan bread and a choice of sides or salads. "The core products have to be good," he stresses. "The potato salad, macaroni salad and the cole slaw all have to be good."

A well-conceived hot bar should include a variety of economical and convenient choices in addition to the chicken and side dishes. "When you look at the hot table, it helps if you have other types of meals," Sussman says. He believes the hot table should include items such as stuffed cabbage, stuffed shells and macaroni and cheese, because these broaden the appeal and allow consumers to think of chicken as the center of many different kinds of meals.

This trend born during the boom economy has not lost its steam. "Shoppers are most interested in ready-to-eat solutions such as rotisserie chicken: 53 percent of shoppers are very interested in adding to or expanding the ready-to-eat section in their primary stores, including 18 percent who are



very interested," according to the *U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends 2008* from Food Market Institute (FMI), Arlington, VA.

## Variety Sells

Fried chicken offerings, which over the last few years have proliferated to include tenders, wings, drums, breasts and nuggets, now seem to be fairly static. "I don't see any additions. I don't see anything unusual," Sussman notes.

However, rotisserie chicken has recently emerged as a major player in the ready-to-eat meal category, primarily because of

growing consumer interest in nutrition and health. This is a boon for poultry, which is already perceived as more healthful than most other meats.

Consumer demand for more healthful food options can be met with a range of preparations in a range of prices. "There's a trend toward more healthful ways of preparing chicken," explains John McBride, vice president for sales and marketing at Magic Seasonings Blends, Inc., New Orleans, LA. "People are looking for flavor in their food and they don't want to load up on salt or fat to get it. Consumers are talking about sodium."

Alternatives that take salt, fat and calories out of chicken can be easy and inexpensive. McBride notes people are looking for grilled chicken because it has less fat and fewer calories than fried. This trend has made salt-free Poultry Magic the No. 2 product at Magic Seasonings.

In many areas of the country, the market for organic, free-range or all-natural poultry is substantial and still growing. Consumers of these products have a mind of their own and may not adhere to traditional concepts of price and value. The products cost more, which would seem to be a problem in hard times, but many people looking for organic or free-range poultry tend to overcome the pricing differential by eating less meat and more vegetables and/or grains.

"The natural and organic meat business is unique in that the price points for our chicken products are not inexpensive," says Gina Asoudegan, communications manager at Applegate Farms, Bridgewater, NJ. "However, there is a great deal of price elasticity in our industry because it is a belief-driven segment. For example, if a person eats meat but feels strongly about the way animals are treated when being raised for food, he or she will not switch to conventionally produced

meat based on price. Instead, consumers will switch from organic to natural or will simply eat less meat."

Perdue is introducing a new line of all-natural chicken products to serve this market.

The interest in a lifestyle more harmonious with nature is even extending to the packaging that carries the poultry from the deli hot bar to the customer's kitchen. Sussman finds, for example, that sustainability is the major selling theme for Merit's micro-wavable bag as an alternative to the hard plastic shell container. The bags take about one-fifth the space to ship in the truck and save on fuel, emissions and pallets.

### Different Strokes

It is essential to identify consumer demographics; knowing who customers are, what types/forms of chicken they prefer and what they will do with chicken once they get it home is the key to a successful program. Perdue has been test marketing its bourbon rotisserie chicken in selected markets to determine the most receptive audience.

A growing consumer base is now using poultry sparingly as part of a diet that features more produce than protein. "The latest trend in sandwiches treats deli meats as a

part of the flavor component of a great sandwich, not the main feature," Applegate's Asoudegan explains. "These sandwiches use grilled seasonal vegetables and fruit to add flavor and texture."

Some consumers are moving toward using deli poultry as an ingredient in a salad, and chicken salad itself is enjoying a renaissance. Leftover rotisserie chicken that has been properly maintained can be turned into chicken salad — mayonnaise based, Caesar, oriental or otherwise. The resulting salad appeals to a large audience and cuts shrink.

If a deli's customer base includes a large number of people who will use the poultry in burritos, tacos or enchiladas, including a chipotle-spiced chicken offering makes sense. "Understand who your customers are, what they purchase, and how they're using the products," Asoudegan urges.

Whatever the customer base, the food-service sector is the competition. "The deli is positioned very well to take advantage of the problems in foodservice," Perdue's Seymour says. "Kentucky Fried Chicken gets \$9 for eight pieces of chicken, but the deli can sell it for \$6.99 or even \$5.99. We need to promote more the value difference compared to restaurants." **DB**

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