



SECRET TO FOOD SAFETY

The right processing and packaging

Concerns related to safe food processing, packaging and transport, while a constant area of monitoring and innovation, have come to the fore anew due to the Coronavirus pandemic that has gripped the world for over a year now.

Food packaging is generally a sterile process anyway, as it requires the utmost care to stave off contamination and hence avoid compromising on quality or safety, the viral element of the pandemic ensured that people all around the world became more aware and concerned about the what and how of food packaging.

Some fresh produce can be packaged simply and does not spoil easily within the purview of a few days, but an essential component of human diet, dairy, is not only perishable, but is vulnerable to spoiling within a few hours of production. Obviously, this increases concerns about access to safe milk and milk products, and the choices become apparent between chilled and straight-from-farm options, or the frozen option, to the more long lasting UHT processed milk available on the shelves.

Although for all-natural produce, the freshest is preferred. But the complications in transportation and preservation of quality of milk makes it necessary to let technology take precedence, especially one which can increase the shelf-life of the product without affecting the nutritional value or safety of the food. This is where the UHT process comes in.

The ultra-high temperature treatment used in the production of UHT milk kills all microorganisms, increasing the shelf life of fresh milk by months. The milk is packed in an aseptic package that protects it from light, oxygen, moisture and air, and the entrance of microorganisms, rendering it safe for months without the need of refrigeration or preservatives. There is simply no need to add preservatives into a UHT treated product, as there are no active microorganisms present in the milk. This is where UHT milk becomes a more viable

option than straight from farm.

The fact that UHT milk is packaged in Tetra Pak cartons brings all the benefits of the safe packaging to the dairy market. "The biggest benefits of packaged food have always been the promise of hygiene, safety, long shelf-life, lesser likelihood of adulteration, convenience, and easy access. This has only become more pronounced during the pandemic," said Ashutosh Manohar, managing director of Tetra Pak South Asia.

UHT milk in Tetra Pak cartons stays fresh for six months unopened, and the easiest way to see the dates for safe consumption are to check the dates on the package. But once opened and exposed to the natural elements, it must be refrigerated, and consumed within a couple of days. The fact that UHT milk does not require refrigeration until it has been opened is an added attraction for a consumer base like the one in Bangladesh, wherein a large number of people are not living in fully urbanised areas with access to electricity and personal refrigerators. In this case, UHT milk in small singular packages can be the perfect answer.

"For example, workers in the garment industry and manufacturing in general in Savar, Gazipur and Narayanganj find it very difficult to access milk daily due to scarcity of raw milk. They have no gas connections or refrigeration either. UHT milk with its long shelf-life and no need for boiling is one of the most important ways for them to meet their daily nutritional needs. In fact, we have been running a 'UHT Bondhu' programme under which, a mobile (milk) retailer goes door to door where retail distribution is challenging," stated Manohar.

"Also, the convenience of not having to boil the milk periodically and ensuring on time refrigeration can be a critical decision-making factor. For consumer groups like young professionals living independently across the country, working mothers trying to juggle between home and work who rely of ready-to-eat, ready-to-drink options

for their convenience, UHT milk in Tetra Pak cartons is a suitable answer," Manohar added.

It is not just milk that is a concern, as the production cycles in agriculture create skewed supply curves that show abundance in one season and scarcity in the next. Apart from enhancing storage capacity, adopting sustainable but long-lasting processing and packaging is a viable option.

The power of aseptic processing and packaging is not just limited to milk. Consumers are warming up to many new

the traditional way of mixing powder in water manually because this eliminates any risk of poor quality of water or incorrect dosage. It is also being adopted as a rehydration drink for consumers with active lifestyles, like gym-goers, those into active sports and those with field jobs.

"We also see immense potential for solutions like Tetra Recart which can help extend the shelf life of foods like peas, corn, mangoes, purees, sauces and more. Anything that would traditionally be packed in an aluminium can, can be offered in a Tetra Recart package, at a fraction of the environmental impact, and potentially result in reducing food waste in the country. We are very excited about bringing this solution to South Asia," Manohar added.

One big question that is often asked when talking about packaged food is – what about the packaging waste after the food in it has been consumed?

"Waste as such is not the challenge, efficient disposal of it is. It really boils down to making informed choices – what is the source of the packaging material? Can it be recycled? Tetra Pak cartons are for instance already over 70 percent paper, and recyclable.

"Most importantly, it's not just a question for us, or brand-owners, it is a question for all consumers – because change starts at home by making the right choices and then doing the right thing. Something as simple as choosing a paper-based package and putting waste in the right bin after consumption," Manohar explained.

"Packaging has its inherent benefits that cannot be denied. Think about absolute essentials like water or milk – how do you access them safely on the go, without packaging? If it comes in an environmentally sound package like a Tetra Pak carton, that's more than half the battle won," he concluded.

By Sania Aiman
Photo: Collected

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health-focussed categories that promise good health and safety.

"There are categories like juices, especially some health and immunity focused ones like 100 percent juice which are becoming increasingly popular among the health-conscious consumers. We are also very positive about the ORS (Oral Rehydration Solutions) which has traditionally been seen only as a solution for the problem of dehydration or diarrhoea. The ready-to-drink ORS is being looked at as a safe, ready to consume alternative to