

Contemporary Collectibles: In defense of spam -- the edible kind

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Has any food product in history ever been as maligned, mocked and slandered as the humble can of SPAM, to the point where its name was chosen to be used for the most lethal enemy of every e-mail subscriber? And yet it has survived for over seven decades, even accruing its own cadre of collectors.

The product was introduced in 1937 by the Hormel Company of Austin, Minn. —founded in the late 1890s as a fresh meat business — under the much more plebian name of Hormel Spiced Ham. Hormel had developed America's first canned ham 11 years earlier, Hormel Flavor-Sealed Ham, unique in that it was the first canned meat product that didn't require refrigeration.

Described as a "distinctive chopped pork shoulder and ham mixture," (at first it was solely made of shoulder meat) it was developed by Jay C. Hormel, the son of the company's founder, George A. Hormel, who wanted to find some use for an underutilized cut of meat. When the product got off to a slow start, it was decided that a catchier name might improve its prospects.

A contest was held to find a new brand name. The winning entry came from the actor brother of a Hormel vice president, Kenneth Daigneau, who walked away with the \$100 prize at a New Year's Eve party. (Some have seen it as a semi-acronym for "shoulder of pork and ham," or a shortening of spiced ham.) The name was registered for trademark on May 11, 1937.

Hormel instituted a massive ad campaign, calling it the "Miracle Meat," to publicize the product. It would become one of the first to be promoted in a TV commercial. But it was World War II that made it a household name in this country and also extended its reputation around the world.

Before the U.S. entry into the war, SPAM was one of the foods shipped to allied communities, including the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as part of the lend-lease program. In his autobiography, Nikita Khrushchev wrote, "Without SPAM, we wouldn't have been able to feed our army."

When American soldiers were deployed to Europe and the Pacific, SPAM was a key ingredient of their K rations. It was far from popular with most GIs, who made jokes and wrote songs about how much they disliked it. Despite that, many of them returned with a taste for it, and sales rose after the war.

SPAM even has a mascot: Spammy, a miniature pig, which was a feature of the Hormel-sponsored George Burns & Gracie Allen radio show. Still enormously popular today after more than 60 years, it has found a special place in Hawaii, where the population consumes an average of four cans per year, and in Korea, where it's sold in elegant presentation gift boxes.

In the United States, 68 state and regional fairs hold Hormel-sanctioned SPAM recipe contests, and there's a SPAM jamboree held every Fourth of July weekend in its hometown of Austin, Minn. "Monty Python's Flying Circus" presented a famous SPAM-bashing skit, which led to the title of the Broadway and touring show "Spamalot," and also indirectly to the e-mail term. Despite this, however, Hormel has now sold more than 5 billion cans of its miracle meat, so clearly its virtual viral designation has done nothing to slow down sales.

When it comes to collectibles, vintage print ads predominate, primarily from women's magazines, some tied in with Bisquick, Kellogg's, Aunt Jemima, Betty Crocker, etc., and also recipe pamphlets put out by Hormel. In addition, there are extremely rare World War II rations, souvenirs from the SPAM Museum in Austin, metal signs, SPAM car-shaped hinged boxes and coin banks, playing cards, and a Hormel SPAM truck made in England.

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