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BEYOND HOPEFUL

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Martha, my dear

The **Martha Stewart** empire encompasses everything from gardening to home goods to entertaining. How does the empress fair, though, with frozen meat products?

Photo by Getty



PRODUCT

Martha Stewart Kitchen Red-Wine Braised Short Ribs with Vegetables

PRICE

\$7.99 per 9-ounce container

PLUS

Tasty sauce and quality meat

PROBLEM

Inconsistent results, **bland flavors**

Martha Stewart—a lifestyle entrepreneur known for her aspirational books and media programs on gourmet cooking, entertaining and decorating—recently expanded her business empire with the introduction of Martha Stewart Kitchen. According to the website for these frozen products, her mission “is to bring delicious, yet convenient, gourmet food items from your local grocery store to your table for entertaining or everyday use.” The

full line of frozen items consists of appetizers, side dishes, single-serve entrées and desserts, all created from Martha’s most popular and favorite recipes. With the continuing growth of frozen foods, we decided to try Martha Stewart Kitchen Ready product “Red-Wine Braised Short Ribs with Vegetables.”

DEMOGRAPHICS

Our tasters ranged in age from 16 up, and focused on those who regularly eat frozen prepared meals.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND APPEARANCE

One taster remarked that “The food picture on the box left me with that ‘I can’t wait to try it’ attitude!” For another taster, though, the actual food compared unfavorably to the packaging.

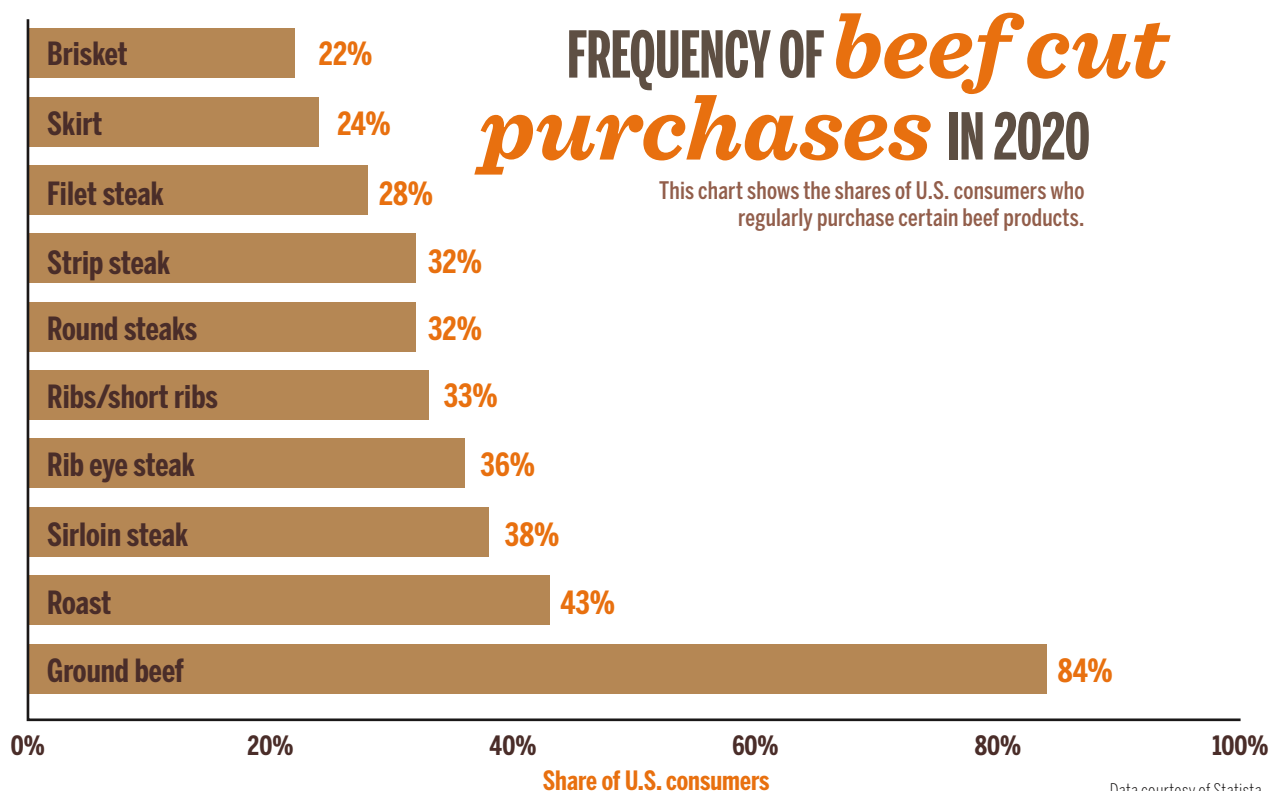
“After removing the product from the box, my initial thought was ‘Wow, this does NOT look like the picture on the box.’ I microwaved it and kept thinking, ‘Hm, I have my doubts.’”

A third taster was

more pointed in their remarks: “When I opened the cooked product, it was a brown disgusting lump of congealed food.”

A couple tasters were pleased with the packaging. One remarked on the “ingenious” metal dish that allowed the food to be either baked or microwaved, and the other appreciated the lack of “cardboard-type trays.”

Finally, one taster observed that the product was “too small a portion for the price,” and another



was surprised by the “very long ingredient list ... due to Martha Stewart’s portrait of healthy/clean food.”

TASTE, TEXTURE AND MORE

Some tasters were big fans of the Martha Stewart braised short ribs. “The sauce was exquisite!” one taster shared. “The red wine flavor blended nicely with the beef taste. I would have liked a bit more sauce, as I had planned on putting it over rice.”

Another taster said the dish was “rather flavorful, and the meat is not gristly,” and an-

other stated, “We were both surprised by the quality of the meat. They were good-sized chunks of short ribs, not a lot of fat on them, and very tender.”

Other tasters, though, shared a number of disagreements with the dish, beginning with its sauce.

“I can smell the wine in the sauce, but do not taste it at all,” a taster said. “There are so many real food ingredients in the ingredient list, but I’m just not getting the taste — it’s so flat. Why?”

In regard to the

sauce, other tasters described it as “bland,” “very flat,” and “soupy,” with a taster concluding, “The package says ‘silky’ gravy, and this is too thin to be silky.”

While some tasters praised the short ribs, others noted an inconsistency in their quality. One taster, who both microwaved and baked the dish, stated both preparations yielded “pieces of meat that were soft/tender, while other pieces were tough and chewy.”

A second taster who experimented

with preparation, though, found the results much better from the oven. “In the microwave, half the meat was shriveled and chewy,” they shared. “From the oven, all pieces were equally tender and tasted high quality.”

And a third stated, “When oven baked, the meat was an A-, which is shocking, because it was so bad from the microwave. It’s tender and feels real.”

Such was the difference in quality, between baking and microwaving, that a taster remarked,

“Baking needs to be the primary cook prep; it should say ‘Best if baked.’”

A group of tasters even chided the dish for the quality of its vegetables. “The [vegetables] felt underdone, and the celery bits lost all structure and were mush,” one stated.

“We were not fans of the root vegetables,” another shared. “They tasted fine, but were mushy, small, and indistinguishable, except for the carrots.”

And finally, a third taster remarked, “The turnips were rubbery and smaller

“It was a very small portion (maybe a cup or a little more) for \$7.99. That’s a lot of money for a small amount of mediocre food.”

than bite size. There were very few carrots and celery in the dish, and they were soggy and lacked flavor.”

UPSHOT

One taster shared they “were both impressed by the quality and the taste of this meal. We might buy this product to keep on hand for quick meals.”

No other tasters, though, said they would buy the product again.

“The Martha meal was okay, not great, and it pains me to say that because I’m a huge Martha fan,” one taster shared. “This meal had potential but overall missed the mark, and I wouldn’t purchase again,” another shared.

A couple tasters were disappointed at how the meal they prepared differed from what was pictured on the box.

“Although the red wine sauce was delicious,” the first taster remarked, “the packaging is misleading. When you open it, there is nothing more than cubes of unrecog-

nizable foods placed in a red wine sauce. I was very displeased.”

The second taster added, “Neither method we prepared looked like the front of the box picture, especially in color and amount of vegetables.”

And numerous tasters zeroed in on the product’s price tag.

“Extremely over-

priced at \$7.99,” a taster said. “A better price is \$5.99.”

A second stated, “The quality was decent, but I wouldn’t buy it again because of the price,” and a third shared, “I would purchase, but at a lower price point; okay for potential lunch at \$6.00.”

A final taster concluded, “I appreciate

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this as a more complicated dish — one that I would never make for just one person — but it was a very small portion (maybe a cup or a little more) for \$7.99. That's a lot of money for a small amount of mediocre food."

CONCLUSION

A celebrity-endorsed product brings with it a higher or different level of expectations, which seems to be the case with these Red Wine Braised Short Ribs. The beef, in particu-

lar, was well received by many (especially when baked), with some even saying it was better than the beef used in many other frozen meals. But the total dish lacked cohesiveness and depth of flavor —

even when baked in the oven. And there were certainly issues with the vegetable quantity and texture. Overall, we're somewhat surprised that Martha Stewart, who seems to be involved in all as-

pects of her projects, would put her name on this higher-priced meal knowing that her audience would have greater (perhaps than normal) expectations for a product from her kitchen.

by **Jacqueline Beckley, The Understanding & Insight Group, and Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, U&I Collaboration LLC.**

Food product development and consumer research veterans, Jacqueline Beckley, Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, join Meatingplace Magazine as regular contributors to MeatingTaste, a consumer sampling of new products featured in our monthly Taste Test column. Here's how the program works: The meat item is distributed to consumers, including the core demographic, for preparation in their own houses. No instructions are provided to the consumer, other than to write their overall impressions of the product, as well as to evaluate the flavor, texture, packaging and ease of use. Beckley, Cesario and Vahalik look for common threads by using Getting It!®, a system developed to listen to consumers about products. The sample of people is not intended to be a "taste test" in a controlled setting, nor is it intended to simulate a focus group. Others are doing both. Rather, the intent is to interpret the response of the people who might purchase a product like this and use it, simply based on their encounters with the product in their individual, unique home environment. That is how U&I has been developing cutting-edge product and people understanding since 1999.



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