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## STICK FIGURES

Refreshed strategies and traditional smoking methods combine to lift **Old Wisconsin** to newfound levels of success





# IT TAKES TWO, BABY

Is two better than one in the latest **Marie Callender's** product?

## PRODUCT:

Marie Callender's Duos Chicken Alfredo/Chicken Parmigiana

## PRICE:

\$4.49 per 14.5-oz. package

## PLUS:

A high-protein meal for a competitive price

## PROBLEM:

Mushy textures and underwhelming sauces

**M**arie Callender's, a frozen ready-meal line ubiquitous with comfort and value pricing, recently added "Duos" to its line of heat-and-eat entrées. Duos is currently a three-variety line featuring a combo of two favorite dishes in one box. We opted to try their Italian-inspired chicken alfredo/chicken parmigiana duo, especially considering the product images on the front of the box looked so appetizing. Their other varieties include creamy pesto chicken/four cheese ravioli and meatloaf/country fried chicken. Given the trend towards comfort foods and nostalgia — and as people are purposefully looking for value, especially in their grocery purchases — Marie Callender's Duos seemed primed for our tasting.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

Tasters for Marie Callender's Duos ranged in age from 13 up, and were all at least occasional eaters of frozen meals.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND APPEARANCE

A number of our tasters shared our appreciation for the product's packaging. One taster called it "catchy and colorful," another called it "very appetizing," and a third labeled it "really appealing."

Some tasters, though, were more skeptical with their initial impressions. One, for instance, appreciated the product's 37 grams of protein, but not its 81% daily value of sodium. Another noticed a discrepancy between Marie Callender's claim of "No Artificial Flavors, Colors and No Preservatives," and then a very long ingredients list.

And then there was the product's portions, and the fact that it paired two pieces of chicken with limited sides. "Is this for one person or two?" a separate taster observed. "It seems like a lot of meat for one person." A second taster elaborated, "It feels like a Hungry Man dinner that forgot the sides. Did someone ask for a bunch of chicken and hardly any side dish? Why add sides at all if

it's that shortchanged? Just go all in on the meat and be done with it."

#### TASTE, TEXTURE, AND MORE

Tasters differed in their preparation of the product. More than one taster was hesitant to cook the chicken in the oven (given the provided plastic tray), and instead cooked it in the microwave. "I didn't want to put the plastic container in the oven," a taster shared, with another adding, "The plastic film on the tray always freaks me out a bit being in the oven."

While tasters were complimentary of the product's aroma, some were critical of the chicken's texture. One commented, "I don't think it's even real chicken — it's a patty," and another remarked, "The chicken is rubbery and doesn't feel like real chicken. Is this a meatless alternative?"

With the product having two very different kinds of chicken, our tasters also specified their impressions. A couple tasters were positive of

**"IS THIS FOR ONE PERSON OR TWO? IT SEEMS LIKE A LOT OF MEAT FOR ONE PERSON."**

the chicken parmigiana, citing the "tender" meat and flavorful sauce.

Far more tasters, though, were negative about the parmigiana. "The breading was terrible," one taster said. "It wasn't crispy; it was like mush." The taster's final word — "mush" — actually proved popular among the detractors, with two others using it to describe the product's breading. A third described it as "very soggy."

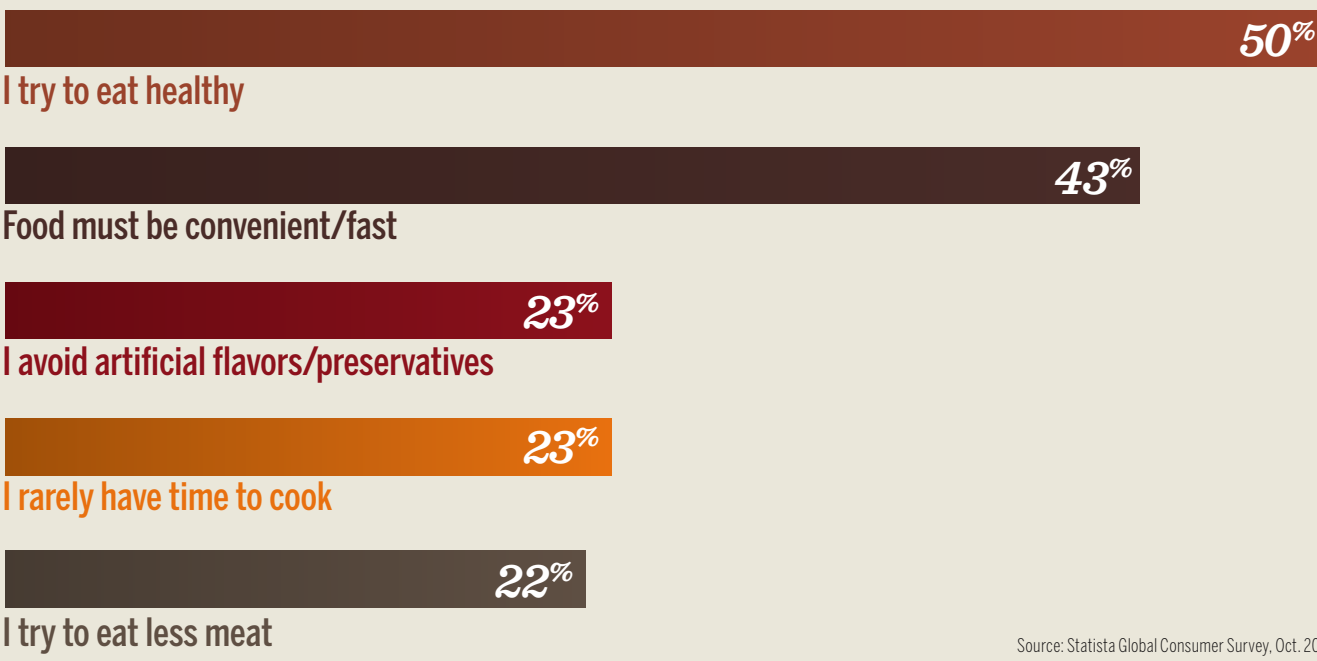
A separate taster noticed a flaw with another critical dimension to any successful chicken parm — the cheese: "Looked really good right from the oven and smelled good too, but there were only a few strands of mozzarella cheese."

Still, the chicken parmigiana fared well compared to the chicken alfredo, which received mostly negative remarks. The sauce, for instance, was described as "not good," "lacked a bit of flavor," "not appealing," "thin," and as a "white gelatinous coating."

The chicken's texture was similarly critiqued.

## THE FROZEN FOOD DINER

Among diners who regularly eat frozen food, there is a wide array of attitudes about cuisine. According to a Statista Global Consumer Survey, half of frozen food diners are trying to eat healthy, while 22% are trying to eat less meat.



Source: Statista Global Consumer Survey, Oct. 2022



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“The grilled chicken had a ‘fake/frozen’ chicken texture,” one taster said. Another shared, “The chicken was very spongy, but chewy.” A third taster asked a valid question: “The chicken had grill marks only on the bottom and it had a rubbery texture. It’s definitely a chicken patty. Why not a ‘real’ breast?”

**UPSHOT**

Some tasters were ultimately positive in their assessment of the Marie Callender’s Duos.

“We thought these were good, and the fact that both pieces of chicken and the pasta were only 600 calories was a pleasant surprise!” a taster shared.

Another stated, “I liked that this combined two different chicken dishes, so it gives the option to have both. I would definitely have this again, especially if I couldn’t order out.”

A third taster liked one, but not both: “The

chicken parm was very good for a frozen meal, but as good as the chicken parm was, the chicken alfredo was very disappointing.”

The majority of tasters, though, were negative with their conclusions. “I would definitely not purchase — it was rather terrible,” a taster said. Another stated, “I avoid all Marie Callender’s now — nothing is ever right.”

A third taster said that while the taste “isn’t terrible,” the food’s quality “is poor.” And a final taster shared a more detailed assessment: “Even as someone who cooks regularly, and who enjoys cooking, it would be nice to have a convenient option once in a while. But this, and many other frozen chicken dishes, just don’t do it.”

**CONCLUSION**

Marie Callender’s Duos provided good value for some; others thought, “You get what you pay for.”



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The idea of providing a lot of protein in the form of classic, well-understood recipes is a great idea. Of course, when you get 37 grams of animal protein, you can get 600 kcals, with unfortunate fat and sodium levels (11g sat. fat/1860 mg of sodium) that can be part of this protein design. Marie Callender's clearly gambled putting together two different main-dish options, and in the case of this variety, one was better received than the other.

Regardless, hearing that many of our taste testers were disappointed with the texture of the

chicken, we believe there is opportunity for not only Marie Callender's, but also the industry, to really consider the texture of frozen chicken breasts. Crispness of breading is also important — again, think texture of the breading. According to the ingredient statement, the chicken parmigiana is a 'breaded white meat chicken patty' and the chicken alfredo is a 'grilled white meat chicken patty' — each with their own ingredient listing. Why? "Real" pieces of tender chicken breasts could have certainly improved this eating experience.

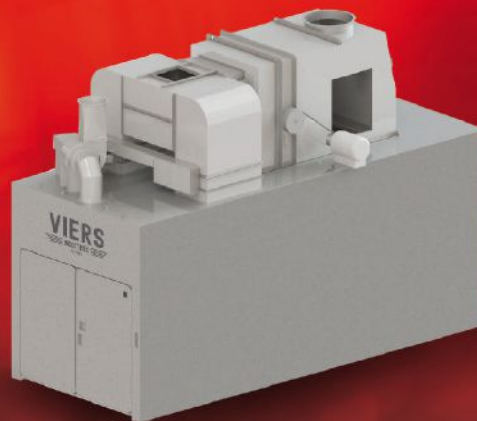
by **Jacqueline Beckley, The Understanding & Insight Group, and Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, U&I Collaboration LLC.**

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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