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# MODERNITY



A new LaChoy chicken product fails to live up to its potential.



## PRODUCT

LaChoy Sweet & Sour Chicken

## PRICE

\$5.97-\$6.99/18-oz. package (3.5 servings)

## PLUS

Easy preparation, flavorful sauce

## PROBLEM

Processed flavor, mushy texture

# Quality control

Photo by Getty

### As the frozen food

category shows continuing growth, LaChoy recognized this opportunity and recently introduced a line of easy-to-prepare frozen entrées. The three items all feature classic Asian-inspired flavors, including sweet and sour chicken, orange chicken, and General Tso's chicken. All three SKUs feature "tempura white meat chicken in a sauce" and boast "no

artificial flavors" and "no added MSG."

We craved the sweet and sour chicken option, and selected that for our tasters to experience at home.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Taste testers all expressed interest in trying a frozen Asian sweet and sour chicken entrée, and ranged in age from a 16-month-old and up.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Our tasters were

divided from their first impressions of the product's packaging. While some appreciated the bag's "good size" and accessible information, one taster found the blue color "fast-food like and a bit cheesy."

Similarly, for the pre-cooked product, one taster thought the chicken pieces "were strange" in their appearance, while another thought the "irregular shape" was

"natural looking."

And although a taster appreciated the "typical orange color" of the sauce, another did not like the "clumpy" appearance, which reminded them of Jell-O.

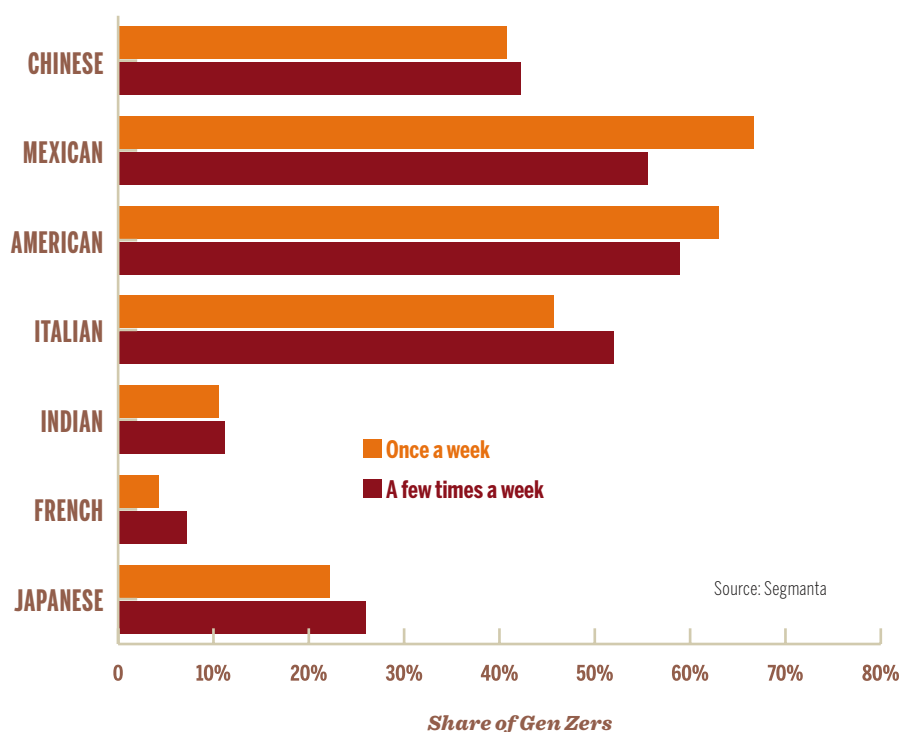
### TASTE, TEXTURE AND MORE

A number of tasters were impressed with the LaChoy sweet and sour chicken.

"We cooked the chicken in a regular oven, and it came out

## A very 'GEN Z' cuisine

Chinese is among the most popular cuisines for Generation Z home cooks. According to a Segmanta study, more than 40% of Gen Z cooks a Chinese dish once a week, and 42.2% do so a few times a week. The three most popular cuisines, meanwhile, were Italian, Mexican and American.



very good,” a taster said. “I was most impressed by the quality of the chicken. It was real little chicken bites, and the breeding was adequately crispy and had an appropriate breeding-to-chicken ratio. The chicken wasn’t rubbery or tough. I was expecting something more artificial.”

Another positive taster remarked, “I think I should have kept it in the oven a bit longer, as it didn’t get as crisp as I prefer. We liked the chicken even with the softer

texture. It was juicy, there was a good quantity and it was not dried out like some frozen meals.”

Other tasters applauded how “straightforward” the preparation was. One taster, who prepared the chicken in an air fryer, described the protein as “light and super crispy,” adding, “Others I bought were disgusting. This tastes very clean.”

The chicken’s flavor, though, also had its detractors, with a number of tasters picking up on an

“aftertaste” that was “fake and processed.” As one taster put it, “It did not taste like Chicken McNuggets, and I would have preferred if it did!”

Those remarks paled in comparison, though, to how many tasters felt about the chicken’s texture. In particular, one word came up more than once: “Mushy.”

“It tastes like chicken, and they’re crispy – I can hear it,” one taster remarked. “But why are they wet on the inside and mushy? Is it real chicken?”

A second taster said, “The texture of the chicken was too spongy, and some were a little mushy. Maybe that’s because the tempura batter wasn’t crisp? The overall tempura texture seemed good, but it had no real flavor in it, and the chicken inside was very white in color and bland.”

A third shared, “The nuggets from the air fryer looked really crispy, but they’re actually very mushy! The outside was crisp and there were pieces that were

burnt. So, although they looked crispy, they were actually wet and mealy.”

Yet another taster stated, “The taste of the chicken wasn’t bad, but wasn’t great. It was also very soft, which was upsetting when expecting it to be crunchy like when it’s fried.”

Interestingly, that taster was one among many to cook La-Choy’s chicken in the air fryer, and for one, the air fryer option was a strong appeal.

“We put it in the air fryer,” they explained.

## *The nuggets from the air fryer looked really crispy, but they're actually very mushy!*

"I like having the option for the air fryer because I absolutely hate to put on the oven and wait for it to heat. It was really quick and easy."

Another taster shared that their air fryer had no impact on the "wetness" of the chicken, and another still wondered "if air-frying would make the chicken taste better and crisper [by] killing the processed chicken taste?"

### UPSHOT

Consistent with their other impressions, some tasters were very positive in their overall assessments of LaChoy's sweet and sour chicken.

"The La Choy chicken was a pleas-

ant surprise!" one taster observed. "I am a serious Chinese food lover, and I figured that frozen sweet and sour chicken would be sort of gross, however I was wrong!"

A second taster saw the chicken as an addition to an Asian-themed dinner night, while another said their enjoyment of the product inspired them to seek out more LaChoy offerings.

Other tasters were more modest in their conclusions.

"My son was not a fan of the dish," one remarked. "He didn't like the flavor and would have preferred it crispier. I did like how an entire meal came together so

quickly with this."

Two other tasters said the chicken was "okay." The first explained, "They weren't bad but weren't amazing. Felt like they have potential to be much better. Generally, I feel like frozen Chinese food is a letdown, but these weren't as bad as others I've had." The second shared, "Something I would eat again, but probably wouldn't go out of my way to buy."

And then finally, the remaining tasters were much more negative, using such words as "bland" and "unhealthy" in their descriptions.

One taster brought up a familiar detrac-

tion: "Because of the texture of the chicken — the wetness — we'd buy it once and then never buy it again. This wouldn't make it to our shopping list." And two other tasters rounded things out with "I don't think I would purchase this again based on the texture, although I think it would be better if cooked longer or prepared in an air fryer," and "This is way too unhealthy for me to make at home, and it's not a complete meal."

### CONCLUSION

LaChoy Sweet & Sour Chicken has the potential to meet consumers' cravings for Asian-inspired entrées at home. And it offers an appeal-

ing, hassle-free, convenient meal option at a reasonable price point. But the quality of the chicken and batter/texture needs optimization and improvement. There is a standard reference in many folks' heads and this product, while "okay," was not meeting the standard, nor what was promised on the package. It is certainly challenging to achieve a tempura-battered chicken with a crispy outside and a tender — not moist, wet or soggy inside — but the technology exists, and we believe LaChoy needs to figure this out to offer a potential winner.

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.