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INNOVATIONS

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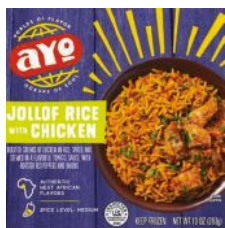
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# West Africa *in the* freezer case

Most enjoy (but fewer would repeat-purchase) this authentic, medium-spiced chicken-and-rice SKU



## PRODUCT

Ayo Jollof Rice with Chicken

## PRICE

\$5.76/10-oz. package (1 serving)

## PLUS

Large chunks of chicken, spice level that worked for most people

## PROBLEM

Some found it too spicy and/or said it did not cook evenly

**As people seek** new culinary experiences, some have started to familiarize themselves with the tapestry of flavors and textures in authentic and heritage-rooted African cuisine.

Available in the supermarket freezer aisle is the Ayo brand from West African Foods, a business started by a husband-and-wife team “to pursue a dream of building a more inclusive grocery aisle for their girls that reflected the food they ate at home.”

We were attracted

to their brightly colored boxes, specifically their jollof rice with chicken, a rich West African dish made with rice, tomatoes, onions, lots of peppers and spice. The box is clearly labeled, “Spice Level: Medium,” so we thought this would be a safe culinary journey for our tasters.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Many of our participants were not familiar with authentic West African flavors, but shared culinary curiosity and were enticed to taste-test this item.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND APPEARANCE

A couple of taste-tasters commented on apparent differences between the images on the packaging and the appearance of the end product.

“The actual chicken looks dark — it’s paler in the picture,” one said. And another commented, “After microwaving, the chicken and rice look much browner than the front of package. The package says it’s chicken thighs, but the picture looks like white breast meat.”

Another contrasted

the package image with those of other products in the freezer case. “The chicken on the front of the package looks different than chicken in traditional frozen entrées—bigger and more real,” the person wrote.

The packaging itself proved an initial barrier to one of the tasters, who noted the bowl is “completely overwrapped and sealed in film.”

### TASTE, TEXTURE AND MORE

The majority of tasters enjoyed the taste

## TASTE *test*

and texture of the Ayo jollof rice with chicken product. “This is the best chicken I’ve had in a frozen meal,” one wrote. “It doesn’t feel compressed and bouncy, or processed and spongy, like most.” Another taster said, “I’ve never eaten chicken like this in a frozen meal. There are some pretty large pieces, and they can be pulled apart like ‘real’ chicken!”

Others had positive comments about the

flavor. “There was just the right amount of spices, and I enjoyed the flavor combination of the different spices,” one wrote.

Others agreed. “The heat level is ‘medium’ just like it says on the front. It’s a very balanced flavor,” one contributor said.

A few people, however, expressed at least some disappointment in the amount of chicken offered. “Chunky pieces of chicken,

but not a lot,” one wrote. Another was initially pleasantly surprised, but overall had a mixed reaction. “I was shocked to see two bigger-than-bite-size chunks of dark meat chicken!” they said, noting, though, that ultimately there was too much rice and not enough chicken.

A couple of others said they understood the portioning. “Very high quality for the price point, so I get why there isn’t a lot

of chicken,” one taste tester wrote. “But what is there is large and excellent.”

Another offered, “It’s called ‘jollof rice with chicken,’ so I guess that’s why there’s more rice than chicken,” they said. “But they’re still bigger, better, higher quality pieces than in a traditional frozen chicken entrée.”

Only a few commenters had explicitly negative things to say about the product.

“Too spicy for me to enjoy,” one wrote.

Others said the texture didn’t work for them: “[W]ith microwave cooking, it doesn’t cook evenly. Some of the rice and chicken were very dried out and stuck together,” one taste-tester said.

### UPSHOT

For a variety of reasons, ranging from spice level to the \$5.76 per box price point, some tasters sounded

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# TASTE *test*

as if they might be one-and-done with the Ayo jollof rice with chicken product. Others said it didn't offer flavors their families would regularly buy.

Others responded positively to the current price point: "We both agree that we would have this again." And finally, one described it as a pleasant surprise: "This is not something that I would have ever picked up

on my own, but I really liked it and would probably buy it again."

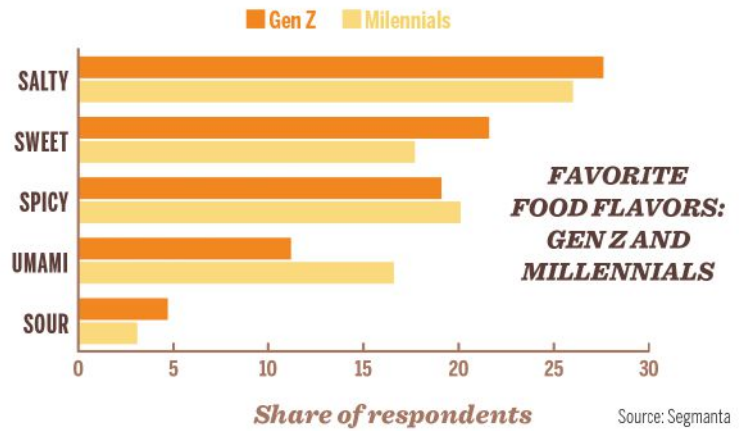
### CONCLUSION

One stand-out from our tasters' comments is a frozen meal can deliver high quality, "real" chicken. We have never heard so many positive comments from a frozen chicken entrée tasting.

Given the mix of positive comments on the chicken and negative remarks

# SALTY GOODNESS

Some tasters did not agree with the spiciness of Ayo's chicken product, and indeed, spicy flavors are not the most preferred for Americans – even among younger generations. According to Segmanta research, for Gen Z and millennial individuals, "salty" flavors were most popular, although for millennials, "spicy" flavors were the second favorite.



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# TASTE *test*

about cooked color and amount, this may reflect inconsistency in how Ayo is producing this product. With a price point near \$6, uniform delivery of quantity is essential.

Another item to

highlight: Brands offering a truly representative, unfamiliar culinary experience may need to consider offering their products in a way that holds down the price point to entice first-time purchase.

Perhaps through in-store tastings?

Considering Ayo also has a line of frozen, bite-size appetizers, perhaps flavor exploration in this format presents a more acceptable risk. Medium-spicy

can attract or repel repeat purchases at this price point.

The *New York Times* recently ran a feature on jollof rice, and identified local restaurants and chefs who offered African cuisine; so,

perhaps this fare will now garner more attention. Ayo jollof rice with chicken may be ahead of its time in the U.S. market — or on the cusp of a breakout for West African cuisine.

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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