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TV dinners – *Spotlight* 04/21

They *never* taste quite like they look on the box. But there's still something irresistibly novel about TV dinners. Aside from the convenience, it's the childlike thrill of eating straight from a package, especially if the food is divided into little compartments, as if it had just been served to you on a plane.

Indeed, the first TV dinners were served at cruising altitude. Launched in the 40s by Maxson Food Systems, these frozen meals of meat, greens and carbs were known as strato-plates. It took a while to 'take off', if you'll pardon the pun. And the exact story is, well, a little 'nebulous'. But, by the mid-50s, the strato-plate had made a definitive landing in America's living rooms.

Early versions included brands like FridgiDinners and One-Eyed Eskimo. But the idea really went gangbusters after a Nebraska-based company coined the ingenious term 'TV dinner', riding on the nation's new national obsession. Swanson salesman Gerry Thomas came up with the concept while figuring out how to offload 270 tonnes of unsold frozen turkey that had been left over after Thanksgiving.

In a 1999 interview with AP, the salesman recalled how he'd been on a plane when he spotted a metal food tray being trialled for in-flight dinners. 'It was just a single compartment tray with foil. I asked if I could borrow it and stuck it in the pocket of my overcoat,' he said. In 1954, Swanson & Sons sold a whopping ten million turkey dinners - packaged to look like a TV screen, complete with knobs.

Gerry's name now adorns the Frozen Food Hall of Fame (yes, it's a thing!), but not everyone is convinced. The company itself has come up with different stories, one of which credits the Swanson sons with the brainwave. Yet it was the company that sent Gerry to sink his hands into a block of cement outside the Grauman's Chinese Theatre to commemorate the dinner's 45th anniversary.

The telegenic salesman has come in for a lot of flak. Back in the 50s, he received hate mail from husbands angry that their wives were no longer cooking from scratch. Moralisers blamed TV dinners for breaking up the American family, no less. But society was changing, and women were already casting off their aprons and moving en masse into the workplace anyway.

Food snobs also queued up to pour scorn on the new trend. 'Eating off a tray in the dusk before a TV set is an abomination,' said Washington columnist Frederick C. Othman in 1957. But the TV dinner was fast becoming a cultural icon, prompting Woody Allen to announce: 'Who bothers to cook TV dinners? I suck them frozen.'

Over the years, the TV dinner has evolved. There are still plenty of sodium-rich artery busters around. But, in the 90s, supermarkets also started offering healthy eating options and chilled versions with an allure of freshness. There have also been a plethora of hook-ups with celebrity chefs from Heston Blumenthal to Jamie Oliver.

As streaming replaces television in our living rooms, teas on knees looks set to stay.

For TV dinners, the sky is indeed the limit.

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