

# A Brief History of Spam, an American Meat Icon

Wednesday, July 9, 2014, by Erin DeJesus



[Photo: freezelight/Flickr]

For a six-ingredient food product, it's taken on a life of its own. Spam — the square-shaped mash-up of pork, water, salt, potato starch, sugar, and sodium nitrate — recently celebrated its 77th anniversary of being alternately maligned, celebrated, musicalized, or the subject of urban legend (one particularly pervasive myth insists that its name is actually an acronym for "Scientifically Processed Animal Matter"). And despite today's more locavore approach to food and some unkind memories from soldiers who were served Spam during WWII, Spam has entered its third quarter-century on the rise. More than eight billion cans have been sold since the Hormel Corporation unleashed the product in 1937; it's currently available in 44 countries throughout the world.

Spam's ability to straddle highbrow and lowbrow is apparently in its DNA: Since its early days, even Jay Hormel, the man who Spam made rich, had a vexed relationship with the lunchmeat. In a 1945 "Talk of the Town" profile published in *The New Yorker*, Hormel met writer Brendan Gill over noontime drinks, during which Gill "got the distinct impression that being responsible for Spam might be too great a burden on any one man." The piece sees Hormel waffling on his brand's association with Spam, spending equal time distancing himself from it ("Sometimes I wonder if we shouldn't have...") and defending it ("Damn it, we eat it in our own home").

Spam's ability to straddle highbrow and lowbrow is apparently in its DNA.

The budget-friendly meat has enjoyed a recent upswing on the American mainland in part thanks to rising meat costs and a floundering economy: When the recession hit in early 2008, Spam saw its sales jump 10 percent compared to the previous year. A CBS News report noted that the increased numbers were seemingly accompanied by a cultural shift: Even consumers who continued to purchase expensive organic vegetables were adding cans of Spam to their pantries. The meat, once relegated as a quirk of Hawaiian or Asian cuisine, started appearing on haute restaurant menus as a nod to that highbrow/lowbrow mash-up, or perhaps to the chef's feelings of nostalgia for the ingredient. (A quick search of Spam recipes from the '60s reveals dishes like Spam upside-down pie; and Spam sandwiches topped with baked beans.)

Today, its sometimes-kitsch factor is a point of pride, for both Hormel and Spam fans: You can show your affection for Spam with everything from Hormel-authorized T-shirts (reading "I think, therefore I Spam") to crocheted, cat-shaped Spam musubi (available for purchase, naturally, on Etsy). Here's a look back at how Spam first got canned, why it's currently beloved in Hawaii and South Korea, and why Spam remains on many restaurant menus today.

## **From Spamtown, USA to the Scurrilous File**

The town of Austin, Minnesota (founded: 1853) occupies just under 12 square miles near the state's southern border, with 24,700 residents as of the 2010 census. It's also home to a street called Spam Boulevard, a restaurant dubbed Johnny's Spamarama, and still more restaurants serving dishes like the "Spam De' Melt" (a grilled cheese stuffed with Spam, bacon, and sour cream). Austin's path to becoming known as "Spamtown, USA" started when George A. Hormel founded his namesake slaughterhouse and meatpacking facility there in 1891, after spending years working in Chicago slaughterhouses. George A. Hormel & Co. became officially incorporated by 1901, processing whole hogs, beef, and sausage casings from its facilities in Austin.

By 1929, George's son, Jay Hormel, took over as president (after serving in World War I), but the product that would best effect Hormel's bottom line wouldn't be invented until eight years later. In her book *Spam: A Biography*, author Carolyn Wyman identifies Hormel's predecessor to Spam as canned pork luncheon meat: Discerning deli-case shoppers would order slices of the canned lunchmeat, shaved off by butchers from their six-pound forms. Jay Hormel set out to design a product appropriate for home use by the consumer, which could be trademarked by the Hormel company (and available in smaller, family-friendly sizes).

According to current Spam brand manager Nicole Behne, there's no one Hormel team member credited with inventing the final ingredient blend, but food historians identify Julius Zillgitt as one Hormel employee who experimented with the original 12-ounce can size. Zillgitt and his colleagues eventually discovered that canning the pork in a vacuum prevented the meat from sweating inside the can, a process that took "a good many years," Hormel later told *The New Yorker*.



## Economic Case Study - MistaBale

That recipe, using pork shoulder (once considered an undesirable byproduct of hog butchery), water, salt, sugar, and sodium nitrate (for coloring) remained unchanged until 2009, when Hormel began adding potato starch to sop up the infamous gelatin "layer" that naturally forms when meat is cooked. According to Behne, the recipe change was purely an aesthetic choice: "It looks a lot better now when you open the can." The rest, Hormel insists, has remained the same.

"I knew then and there that the name was perfect."

Although lore behind the name Spam varies, Hormel himself claimed the product was named for a combination of the words "spice" and "ham," despite the fact that neither ingredient appears in Spam. The confusion has led some to speculate that Spam is an acronym for "Shoulder of Pork And Ham," but company line gives Kenneth Daigneau, the brother of a Hormel VP, credit for naming the product. As Hormel tells it, he launched a naming contest for the new product during a New Year's Eve party, when Daigneau spit out "Spam" as if "it were nothing at all," Hormel told Gill. "I knew then and there that the name was perfect."



Soldiers in a U.S. Army Air Force unit during World War II named their camp "Spamville" in tribute to the product; a 1942 can of Spam bearing a "special economy label" during wartime. [Photos: Hormel Foods]

While housewives in the late '30s soon grew accustomed to the idea of unrefrigerated meat, the brand didn't make its global mark until World War II, when the U.S. military purchased a variety of

canned meats — not exclusively Hormel's Spam brand — to feed troops overseas. Hormel's figures put the number at 100 million pounds of Spam sent abroad to both American and Allied soldiers. Hormel kept a "Scurrilous File" collecting hate mail from American GIs.

As troops started to complain about eating Spam (or some other canned meat variant) for as many as three meals a day, Hormel faced an unexpected anti-Spam backlash. In his 1945 *New Yorker* interview, Hormel revealed to Gill that he kept a "Scurrilous File" collecting hate mail from American GIs, in which "he dumps the letters of abuse that are sent to him by soldiers everywhere in the world. 'If they think Spam is terrible,' Mr. Hormel told us, 'they ought to have eaten the bully beef we had in the last war.'"

## Spam as Culinary Tradition

During WWII, Spam's reach made its way to England and the countries of the Asian Pacific, where rationing and the presence of American troops saw the meat become a menu staple. "Having the sort of food that can survive in the tropical heat and be kept on a shelf for weeks and months was a huge boon," says food historian Rachel Laudan, who writes extensively about food politics and how empires affect local cuisines. Laudan, who grew up in postwar Britain, has written about how deep-fried Spam fritters "turned up regularly for school lunches... one more in the series of horrors produced by the school cooks" in England.

By the end of WWII — and with thousands of American GIs returning home who would refuse to eat it — Spam saw its role start to slowly shift away from convenient protein source to "sometimes-food" side dish. "When you look at the core of America after the war, Spam really made an evolution away from being that 'center of the plate' meal option," Behne says. "Mom used to make it and put cloves in the Spam and use it as the center of the plate. The evolution definitely started in the '60s where it became more of an ingredient: It was used for sandwiches and as an ingredient in eggs."

But while the core of America pushed Spam to the side of their plates, the canned meat became a culinary sensation in much of the Asian Pacific and Hawaii. Asia's present-day fondness for Spam stemmed directly from WWII and following conflicts, during which an entire generation grew up with Spam. In Hawaii, Spam's proliferation happened less due to the presence of American GIs and more to the government restrictions unfairly placed on the local population. "Unlike the mainland, they couldn't intern all the Japanese [in Hawaii]," says Laudan, who spent years living in Hawaii and published *The Food of Paradise: Hawaii's Culinary Heritage* in 1996. "The economy would have collapsed."





Instead, the United States placed sanctions on Hawaiian residents, restricting the deep-sea fishing industries that were mainly run by Japanese-Americans. Because islanders were no longer allowed to fish, Laudan says, "one of the important sources of protein for the islands vanished." Spam — along with other canned luncheon meats and sardines — took its place.

Simultaneously across the Pacific, residents of Korea and Japan "were on the point of starvation," Laudan says. "The cans of Spam coming in were an absolute godsend in those terrible situations at the end of World War II." In Korea, where American forces returned during the Korean War, *budae jjigae* (translation: "Army Stew") would emerge as a wartime staple: Restaurant owner Ho Gi-suk claims to have invented the dish by simmering Spam and other canned meat smuggled from a U.S. Army base with broth and spices. Today, Korea is the world's second-largest consumer of Spam (after only the United States), where it's seen as a luxury item: Spam is a popular gift for the Lunar New Year, packaged in gift boxes along with cooking oil and seasonings.



*Spam musubi. [Photo: Janine/Flickr]*

In the decades after WWI, as native Koreans and Japanese migrated to Hawaii, food culture in the islands became even more intertwined, combining the culinary preferences of natives and the Asian and Anglo diasporas. Japanese immigrants to Hawaii are credited with inventing Spam musubi, a Hawaiian version of onigiri that binds a cooked slab of Spam to rice with a piece of nori. (Touted for its portability, it's still widely available in Hawaiian convenience stores as an easy grab-and-go lunch or snack.) Diner staple loco moco, a dish featuring rice topped with a hamburger patty, fried egg, and brown gravy often features Spam as an additional protein. And the meat pops up in everything from fried rice to omelets to saimin (the Hawaiian noodle soup dish).

"Instead of saying, 'Why is it so odd that people in Hawaii or people in Korea or people in the Philippines eat Spam and like it,' the question is: Why did it become such an object of deep scorn?" Laudan asks. "Perhaps it was because [mainland Americans] saw themselves as unloading Spam on 'those people over there.'"

## Spam Jam

Today, Spam fervor in Hawaii has sustained a decade-old Spam festival in Waikiki, where chefs and Spam-lovers gather to appreciate and explore the lunchmeat's role in Hawaiian culture. Earlier this spring, the 12th-annual Spam Jam saw more than 24,000 attendees converge to sample dishes like Spam lettuce wraps, Spam and corn chowder, Spam-and-basil on Sicilian-style pizza, and a dessert dubbed "Mom's Puerto Rican Spam flan." "We are Spam-lovers like crazy here. Like crazy," says festival co-founder Karen Winpenny, who has memories of the ingredient dating back to when she was eight or nine years old. "When I was riding my horse as a kid," she says, "we'd



stop at a 7-11 and grab Spam musubi."



*Spam Jam [Photo: Kyle Nishioka/Flickr]*

According to Winpenny, the first edition of Spam Jam was devised as a way to get local Waikiki residents to intermingle with tourists and vice versa. "Everybody thought it was cute," Winpenny says of gathering the six-to-eight chefs for the first edition. "They laughed and thought it was funny; that it would be a quirky little thing to do. Something new." After a few years, the festival grew into an all-day street fair, and it's officially recognized by Hormel: It sends ambassadors, in the form of mascots Sir Can-A-Lot and "Spammy," to take photos with visitors. Most importantly, the event has emerged as a way to raise money and awareness for the Hawaii Food Bank. The 2014 of the Waikiki Spam Jam collected more than 1,100 pounds of food and \$20,500 for the food bank, and the charity partner, Winpenny says, is a natural tie-in. The Hawaii Food Bank's most-requested item is cans of Spam.

## **Spam and Haute Cuisine**

A recent Gothamist article argued Spam was making a comeback at "hip NYC restaurants," name-dropping Spam dishes at New York Sushi Ko and Williamsburg Hawaiian restaurant Onomea. The story found its way across the Pacific, with Winpenny bringing it up during our conversation: "I read an article: I guess New York's starting to do something with Spam, too."

Spam on upscale restaurant menus is not a recent phenomenon.

But Spam on upscale restaurant menus is not a recent phenomenon. James Beard Award-winner Alan Wong has experimented with a housemade version (dubbed "Spong"), which shows up in breakfast dishes at his Honolulu restaurant Pineapple Room. In 2011, the *New York Times*' Sam Sifton called the Spam- and hot-dog-laden DMZ stew at Danji at "classic." Even before he acted as

an official spokesperson for Spam, LA's Roy Choi offered Spam musubi and Spam-laden rice bowl specials at Chego, his first brick-and-mortar restaurant. (His new spot, POT, offers a version of *budae jjigae*.)



And in 2009, Vinny Dotolo and Jon Shook of LA's Animal created a cult classic mash-up with their Spam and foie gras loco moco, re-imaging the Hawaiian dish with Carolina gold rice, hamburger patty, foie gras, and Spam straight from the can. The spam-and-foie loco moco, which Dotolo says was inspired by his curiosity toward Hawaiian food, soon became an icon: When Animal was profiled later that year in both the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker*, its use of Spam and foie in one dish became the emblem of

the restaurant's "giddy, sophisticated-stoner sensibility."

Thanks to California's foie gras ban, the dish is currently off the menu at Animal, but Dotolo says the dish was reflective of "who we are in Los Angeles." "It's a food that's popular because of the Japanese, Filipino, and Korean population in Hawaii, and that same culture is in LA." (Indeed, famed Korean food truck Kogi has offered Spam taco specials and sliders; Filipino fast-food chain Jollibee, which has its largest American presence in Southern California, offers Spam, egg, and rice breakfasts and Spam sliders. "There's something about Spam... it has a certain quality, texture, and taste that: You can mimic it, but you can't get it exact."

But Animal's take on the dish was bestowed with an air of "punk attitude" in the press, its mash-up of highbrow, lowbrow, and a surfer's appetite considered a new approach to fine dining. The use of Spam — the most processed of processed meats — seemed to be central to the digression. "We didn't process our own [Spam] — which obviously was an idea — but then it'd be like a ham terrine, in a sense, and it wasn't really the same thing," Dotolo says. "There's something about Spam and the way they emulsify it and the whole thing, it has a certain quality, texture, and taste that: You can mimic it, you can get it close, but you can't get it exact."

"I think it's a kind of a dare, probably, an in your face thing," says Laudan of fine-dining chefs embracing Spam as an ingredient. She asserts that due to Spam's "déclassé" reputation on the American mainland, today's fine-dining chefs under the age of 40 to 45 probably never ate it as kids. Dotolo is one of those chefs, admitting he first ate Spam as an adult, experiencing musubi for



the first time. "I don't eat it now," Dotolo says. "But I dig it: The guys in the kitchen every now and then, they'll make musubi or they'll make a Spam salad thing, spicy Spam."

### **Both Ends of the Spectrum**

As Spam lands on more restaurant menus, researchers at Hormel are watching closely to see how culinary trends can influence new Spam flavor profiles. In recent years, Hormel has launched new flavors like Black Pepper, Jalapeño, and most recently, Chorizo and Teriyaki varieties to "jazz up our Spam a little bit," Spam brand manager Nicole Behne says. (The Spam lineup also includes previously launched products like Spam with Bacon, Hickory Smoke-flavored Spam, and Hot & Spicy, Spam dotted with Tabasco sauce.)

"Hormel has a big portion of our business that goes to the food-service side, so we look at restaurant trends," Behne says. "Through our consumer insights team we were looking at trends in restaurants, trends in the foodie world." (With that in mind, Sriracha Spam can't be too far off.) Behne notes that Teriyaki Spam, which launched in Hawaii in Fall 2013, is "already the number four variety of Spam on the island." Jalapeño Spam, she notes, sells particularly well in Texas, with its large Hispanic population.



*Inside Austin, Minnesota's Spam Museum. [Photo: Hormel Foods]*

"You really can't change the fabric of who you are," says Behne of the product's kitschy reputation. "We have to embrace it and work with it." To wit: Austin, Minnesota's Spam Museum, which features a mock canning line and exhibits about historic label design and Monty Python. (The comedy group's now-iconic "Spam" sketch birthed not only the name of Monty Python's musical

but also the internet usage of "spam" to describe annoying, indiscriminately sent emails.)

Later this year, the museum will temporarily close to move into a new space, losing about 3,000 square feet of space in exchange for a downtown Austin location. The move, Behne says, will hopefully draw more tourist dollars to the Austin community. Not counting those working for the Spam Museum and other offshoot businesses, Hormel Foods, the maker of Spam, employs more than 4,100 people in the Austin area.

"The great thing is, a lot of our consumers talk about the recipes that have been passed down from generation to generation, which I think is awesome," Behne says. "It's also super cool to see the chefs in the foodie world coming up with new ways to make Spam. That excites me too. It just kind of shows versatility of [Spam] — both ends of the spectrum."

---

Happy Eating!