

Why does Gen Z love canned goods?

REPORT | 2 Mar 2023

In the face of economic crisis and climate change, Gen Zers are turning to canned food to save on their weekly shop. Driven by an appetite for novel food experiences and sustainable everyday products, they're embracing TikTok-ready canned brands that deliver flavor, authenticity, and values.

AUTHORS

Lisa Harris

Alexandra Hayes

LOCATIONS:
UNITED STATES

GENERATIONS:
GEN Z (BORN
1997-2010)

SECTORS:
EATING AND DRINKING
GENERAL FOOD



EXPERTS

Kat Kavner



Erifili GounarLaima Widmer

Dr. Anna Zeide

Jessica Dennison

HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** Canned food's capacity for novel flavors and ingredients appeals to Gen Zers' desire for creativity in the kitchen
- 02** Canned food is being repositioned as a high-protein snack, romantic indulgence, or route to authentic international recipes
- 03** Premium canned foods are leveraging flavor-forward new product development and indulgent 'unboxing' aesthetics to appeal to Gen Zers

DATA

- 31% of US households skip or reduce the size of their meals because they don't have enough food in the house
- 53% of Gen Zers find inspiration for new foods through TikTok
- Sales of canned seafood rose 9.7% to \$2.7 billion in the US in 2022

SCOPE

US sales of canned seafood rose 9.7% to \$2.7 billion in 2022, with industry executives putting the surge in demand down to younger shoppers seeking novel but affordable food. [1] "The rise of canned food may be driven by convenience and cost, but it also appeals to Gen Zers for a variety of reasons," says Laima Widmer, vice president at Suzy consumer insights platform. "Firstly, 33% of Gen Zers said they value sustainability when they shop for food, which canned food and tinned fish can deliver. Over half (55%) said they are open to trying new foods and flavors. Finally, canned food may also offer Gen Z consumers an easy and healthy meal during #depressiontime, a hashtag with over 573 million views on TikTok." [2]

Food insecurity is on the rise across the US, with 55% of US consumers saying they are not getting enough of the food they want to eat, and 18% are not getting enough to eat at all. This is also shaping wider eating habits, as 31% of US households skip or reduce the size of their meals because they don't have enough food in the house. [3] As a result, 46% of consumers are switching to cheaper foods, while 22% are also buying less fresh fruit and vegetables. [4]

While worrying in itself, this shift presents a huge opportunity for canned goods as they are generally a more economical alternative. Walmart sells value sliced peaches for \$1.28 a can (\$1.36/pound), for example, while fresh peaches at a farmers market retail more than double that, from \$2-4/pound. Reports suggest that canned food costs around a fifth as

much as fresh and half as much as frozen food. [5] Artisanal canned goods don't fit this equation, however, as boutique canned fish might be as much as \$20 to \$30 a pop, especially if it's imported from Europe.

Convenience and shelf life also play into canned food's popularity post-pandemic. Fresh produce lasts a matter of days, whereas canned goods can be stored at ambient temperatures from 18 to 24 months. Post-pandemic consumers tend to have a disaster-aware mindset and are more likely to stockpile food in case of emergencies. Gen Zers came of age in a permacrisis, and are therefore increasingly receptive to more stable food formats.

Overall this is good news for the global specialty tin cans market, which is estimated to be valued at \$899.4 million by 2032. The category is on the up, with growth projected at 4.8% from 2022 to 2023. [6] It seems the US will lead this growth of the speciality tin can industry, by reaching a valuation of about \$217.7 million by 2032. [5] However, this phenomena isn't limited to the US; in the global South, Gen Zers are gradually adopting international eating habits, which is predicted to increase future sales of canned soups, fish, and meat in these markets too. [5]

NOVEL FOOD EXPERIENCES

Gen Z considers themselves a 'foodie' generation, with over half stating that what they eat is indicative of who they are. [7] Newness and discovery are a huge driver in this experience and food identity creation. "Gen Zers are more open to new flavors and experiences," says Erifili Gounari, founder and CEO of global Gen Z social media agency, The Z Link. "Exploring new flavors connects to Gen Zers' youthful value of openness." [8]

Interest in canned goods peaked during the pandemic, as Gen Zers were forced to get creative with whatever they had to hand. This was predominantly inspired by social media, as 53% of Gen Z said they find inspiration for new foods through TikTok. [9] Brands like SPAM capitalized on this captive audience; the limited-edition pumpkin spice flavor of the iconic canned meat sold out almost immediately. TikTok influencers like @Bayashi.tiktok also keep their 42.8 million followers engaged with contemporary SPAM recipes including [fritters](#) or [stuffed air fryer SPAM](#). As an intrinsic part of Asian Pacific food culture after it was introduced by American GIs during WWII, chefs like Bayashi and [Chris Oh](#) bring SPAM to a new generation seeking Asian recipes with an authentic identity.

TikTok is also credited with fueling Gen Zers' new discovery of tinned fish. San Francisco chef and 'tinfluencer' [Ali Hooke](#) shared her Friday #Tinnedfishdatenight tradition on the platform, which has since amassed 23.6 million views. Hooke and her followers tend to celebrate artisanal US canned fish brands like [Scout](#), [Fishwife](#), and [Patagonia](#) as well as European brands including [Ortiz](#), [Olasagasti](#), and [Siesta Co](#). There is a close correlation between tinfluencers and sales: Vancouver's Scout Canning grew revenue by 82% to \$4 million and Hooke refers 500 people a month to their site, while Alaska's Wildfish Cannery reported double wholesale revenue in 2022. [1] Tinned fish for supper isn't new, but the TikTok treatment is and it makes not cooking feel like the ultimate indulgence.

High-end canned fish brands like Ortiz or Fishwife have a novel 'unboxing' pleasure and discovery element to their packaging, as layers of paper peel back to release vintage-style ring pulls. The simplicity of such meals has great appeal: add a slice of sourdough and green leaves to a can of anchovies, and you have a meal in minutes. The Canadian [Club de Millionaires](#) mascot even makes anchovies feel aristocratic with his jaunty top hat, for example, and taps into this achievable indulgence mythology. Ultimately canned food offers innovation and novelty within relatively conservative parameters. "Canned food resonates with Gen Zers' liking for things that are affordable, easy, and effortless, while also being a way to tap into creativity by creating recipes and 'innovating' with something limited," says Gounari. [8]



TikTok influencers like @Bayashi.tiktok keep followers engaged with SPAM recipes

@Bayashi.tiktok | TikTok (2022)

CONVENIENCE AND VERSATILITY

Novelty might win new consumers over, but canned food's convenience and versatility keeps them coming back. [Heyday Canning Co.](#) co-founder and CEO Kat Kavner believes that core values of convenience, sustainability, and innovative flavors are key to the brand's success: "We started Heyday because we deeply believed that canned food had all of the right qualities to appeal to a younger generation of consumers: it's convenient, accessibly priced, sustainable from both a packaging and food waste perspective, and naturally processed using only heat. It boggled us why the canned food aisle remained dominated by outdated legacy brands and uninspired commodity items. We take a very different point of view on canned food than others in the marketplace; we lead with bold, vibrant flavors, premium-quality ingredients, and a warm, joyful brand." [10]

Crafted in collaboration with TheNew York Times and Bon Appétit recipe developer Ali Slagle, Heyday products might read like [Alison Roman](#) in a can, with heat-and-serve variants including Harissa lemon Chickpeas or Kimchi Sesame Navy Beans. But they are clearly doing something right: "About 48% of our Instagram followers are 18 to 34," says Kavner. "We believe our brand resonates with a young audience because we're marrying the existing value of canned food with a more modern approach to food and home cooking." [10]

Remarkably, canning's return to young audiences mirrors how it was first received in the 1920s. "As with many technologies throughout history, younger demographics (women in their 20s and 30s) took to canned foods more readily when they first were rising in popularity in the earlier 20th century," says Dr. Anna Zeide, food historian and author of *Canned: The Rise and Fall of Consumer Confidence in the American Food Industry*. "As canned foods' novelty was eclipsed by newer kinds of processed foods by the 1970s and 1980s, however, canned foods started to feel old-fashioned and less in favor." [11] Canned food has struggled to shake off this fusty reputation ever since, until the advent of more versatile, flavor-forward brands like Heyday and Gen Zers' enthusiasm injected energy into the category.

Cookbooks highlight just how versatile canned products are. "I have a diverse reader demographic," says author of *Tin Can Magic*, Jessica Dennison. "Younger readers just tend to be more active on social media. They share 'stories' of their

dinner parties, with recipes for sweetcorn tacos or wine-braised butter beans – especially university students. Younger people tend to ask me for vegetarian or vegan recipes, but I don't think it's about age with canned food. Convenience and price accessibility appeals to everyone.” [12] Versatility is important to 32% of Gen Zers, which might explain why the top-four canned goods for purchase are beans (56%), corn (56%), soup (54%), and tomatoes (41%). [13] This is a generation that came of age during the pandemic, when pantries and home store cupboards were all they had to turn to at dinner time. Whereas previous generations might identify canned goods with compromise and wartime food efforts, Gen Zers see them as part of everyday life.

Canned food's versatility also lends itself to Gen Zers' modular eating habits. Fewer than half of Gen Zers eat three traditional meals a day, instead they resort to mini-meals and increased incidence of snacking. [14] A tin of fish, beans, or can of soup are mini-meals ready in minutes. Bumblebee foods have even repositioned tuna as [Protein on the Run](#), by packaging up a tin of tuna, crackers, and a spoon to eat on the move, with a sweet caramel treat to take away that fishy smell afterwards.



Artisanal US canned fish brand Scout grew revenue by 82% to \$4 million

Scout | Facebook (2022)

SUSTAINABILITY AND VALUES

Sustainability is high on Gen Zers' agenda: more than a quarter of Gen Z adults and one in five Gen Z teens expect food and drink brands to invest in sustainability initiatives. [15] When the price difference between organic and non-organic fresh food can be pronounced, organic canned goods can feel more achievable for value-driven Gen Zers on a budget. Research from Suzy holds this out, as 34% of Gen Zers interviewed said that canned goods resonated with their sustainability values. [13]

As an infinitely recyclable and durable material, tins present a viable alternative to single use plastic and glass. The rise in canned wine is a great example of this, as well as premium tea, coffee, and biscuits brands increasingly repackaging premium products in cans. These artisanal canned brands make quality and provenance their point of difference: [Wildfish](#) revels in “doing things the right way, which happens to be the slow way and the hard way,” as they hand-harvest, naturally

wood smoke and hand-pack sustainable seafood in one of Alaska's oldest canneries. Likewise [Eden](#) prides itself on sourcing organic beans from a "network of salt-of-the-earth growers... we know and trust" to create premium-feel canned pulses.

While these challenger brands are disrupting the market and engaging Gen Z consumers with sustainable values, their impact remains limited. Euromonitor International senior research analyst Miri Eliyahu told Foodnavigator USA that "large players (like) Bumble Bee Tuna, Starkist, and Chicken of the Sea remain the market leaders, with artisanal seafood brands only accounting for about 11% of the market total." [16]

Outside of premium ranges, there is work to be done around perceptions of quality and canned foods: 34% of US vegetable consumers perceive canned vegetables as processed. [17] However, all is not lost, Widmer believes. "It's possible that canned products can continue to increase appeal if they can demonstrate quality ingredients at the source," she says. [2] Overall, canned food and drink are ripe for reinvention. Canned food resonates with core Gen Z values; with the capacity to be novel, versatile, and sustainable it presents a compelling and convenient alternative to fresh and frozen produce. Gen Yers might have been accused of [killing canned tuna](#), but it looks like Gen Zers are bringing it back.



Serious Bean Co.'s flavor descriptors include 'Sweet and a bit Sassy' baked beans

Serious Bean Co (2023)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

CHAMPION VERSATILITY

Convenience and cost-cutting means consumers want one product they can use in multiple meals. Position your products as flexible midweek meal solutions; batch cooking and freeze-ahead recipes are popular, as well as recipes using everyday ingredients in unexpected ways. Versatile plant-based products should be a significant focus for canned new product development to appeal to Gen Zers: Pacific food's [oat milk soups](#) is a good example of this, as well as their [vegan chilis](#).

MULTI-PLATFORM CREATIVITY

TikTok is central to Gen Z food discovery and trends. Utilize this platform to promote new offerings and showcase existing products in novel ways. Engage with trending topics like #tinnedfishdatenight and enlist influencers to use your products. Look outside of food for maximum Gen Z reach: Campbell's successfully partnered with the [NFL](#), live streaming platform [Twitch](#), and video game EA Madden to attract Gen Z consumers post-pandemic. [18] Social campaigns can also have an emotive or playful edge: [Pacific Foods](#) found that two thirds of Gen Z faced a break-up around December, for example, and so created a 'Soup-port' box for friends to share and heal a broken heart. Likewise, canned fish brand Chicken of the Sea launched a [National Mermaid Spotting](#) competition to position their product as an irreverent part of everyday life.

EMBRACE NEW FLAVORS

Canned food lends itself to brands that want to appeal to both the thriftiness and explorative nature of Gen Zers. Relatively neutral ingredients like white beans or white fish are a blank canvas for on-trend flavors like kimchi, za'atar, chilli, and herbs, which appeals to Gen Zers' appetite for food discovery, novelty, and punchier flavor profiles. [Serious Bean Co.](#) opt for playful flavor descriptors like 'Sweet and a bit Sassy' baked beans, for example, or tap into deep American cultural nostalgia with Carolina Gold or Southwest Smokehouse canned beans. Familiar flavors can also be repackaged as new. Canned water brand [Liquid Death](#) is a case in point, with 25% of its consumer base as Gen Z. [19] Berry, lime, and mango-flavored water are not revolutionary – neither is plain water itself – but as the most-followed US drinks brand on TikTok (3.3 million followers), Liquid Death speaks to Gen Zers on their own terms and effortlessly embodies their surreal, meme humor. Much like innocent drinks did for Gen Yers, Liquid Death has pioneered a zeitgeist tone of voice for Gen Z.

RELATED



Budget-conscious foodies turn to canned tuna on

SIGNAL • 25 JAN 2023

Canned tuna has become increasingly in vogue on TikTok, leading to increased sales and a slew



How do Americans feel about comfort food?

REPORT • 7 OCT 2022

The increased stress levels experienced in recent years have seen many Americans turn to junk food to cope,



What's behind the rise of 'laissez-faire' food content?

REPORT • 10 NOV 2022

Gen Zers are on a quest to capture life's messy moments online. Favoring a 'laissez-faire' outlook from



Eve Turow-Paul on how to adopt climate-friendly diets

REPORT • 13 MAY 2022

Behavioural changes around food can take generations to embed, but action is needed now to

SOURCES

1. The Wall Street Journal (January 2023)
2. Interview with Laima Widmer conducted by the author
3. Businesswire (October 2022)
4. Attest (2022)
5. Future Market Insights (January 2023)
6. Globe Newswire (January 2023)
7. The Food Institute (June 2022)
8. Interview with Erifili Gounari conducted by the author
9. Progressive Grocer (December 2022)
10. Interview with Kat Kavner conducted by the author
11. Interview with Dr. Anna Zeide conducted by the author
12. Interview with Jessica Dennison conducted by the author
13. Suzy (February 2023)
14. IFT (March 2022)
15. Mintel (January 2022)
16. Foodnavigator USA (January 2023)
17. Mintel (2022)
18. US Chamber of Commerce (May 2022)
19. AdAge (December 2022)

Want to know more?

Canvas8 are a leading behavioural insight practice. Working across media, communication and product design, we harness a range of research methods to reveal practical insights into what audiences really think and do.

EXPLORE THE PLATFORM

Unrivalled resource of 29,000+ articles on global consumer behaviour, available exclusively to members.

Your account manager:

lowri@canvas8.com

BECOME A MEMBER

A Canvas8 membership allows you to continually monitor changes in human behaviour by carefully blending multiple disciplines into a more holistic, living view. Delivered to you in a one platform and designed for businesses that need results from their insights.

Gary Robinson | Group Commercial Director

gary@canvas8.com

BESPOKE SOLUTIONS

From ethnographic research to strategic planning workshops, we offer a range of solutions tailored to enhance your understanding and inspire creativity.

James Cunningham | Group Head of Strategic Partnerships

james@canvas8.com