

Ambient meal ranges in store for Mars and Heinz

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Competition is hotting up in ready meals as Mars and Heinz take on chilled products with ambient ranges.

Mars said it is launching Uncle Ben's RiceTime and Dolmio PastaVita ambient snack pot ranges (rsp: £1.99/300g) to target consumers looking for a healthy, convenient meal. The microwaveable pots come in five flavours, including Mexican chilli with rice and fusilli bolognese, and provide one of a consumer's five-a-day. Mars said the launch was aimed at the single meal market,

which represented about a third of eating occasions [Kantar Worldpanel, MAT March 2010].

"Consumers perceive chilled products as a lot healthier than ambient but with brands like Dolmio and Uncle Ben's I think we can change that," said head of ready meals Paul Aikens. The ranges will hit Asda later this month before a wider roll-out in August.

Meanwhile, Heinz is claiming a first for the lunchtime market by offering microwaveable pasta pouches. The four-strong range - including red pepper & mushroom sauce

with penne, and spicy tomato & pepperoni sauce with fusilli (rsp: £1.39/250g) - will launch later in July.

The Mars and Heinz products are cheaper - but smaller - than chilled offerings such as Innocent's 400g Mexican sweet potato chilli pot, which averages £3.24 at the big four retailers [BrandView].

"Only time will tell as to whether Heinz and Mars can leverage 'health' credentials versus the likes of Innocent," said Value Engineers consultant Will Butterworth, "but the lower price point should help encourage consumer trial."