



The Bistro Express range has already enjoyed success in foodservice

# Airtight secret to ready meals that keep for a year

## Vince Bamford

A range of ambient ready meals that has a 12-month shelf life, uses no artificial colourings or preservatives and in many cases is gluten-free and halal is looking for further retail listings.

But despite also ticking boxes when it comes to waste reduction and health, industry observers say the Bistro Express range may first have to overcome consumer preconceptions.

Owner Enterprise Brands said the 12-strong range offers chilled ready-meal quality in a line-up that includes chicken korma & rice and spaghetti bolognese (rsp £2.99). The products are "gently pasteurised" using microwaves and get their long life from being sealed in a bespoke airtight tray similar to those used for chilled ready meals.

"It is this unique process that gives us the quality," said Mike Ashton, joint MD of Enterprise Brands. "Many

ambient products, such as tinned goods, are over-cooked during production."

The microwave process is similar to that used for some ready meals sold by discounters in Europe, where ambient goods play a larger role than in the UK, according to Ashton, as they do not have the UK's chilled supply chain.

The company launched the range in the UK in 2009. It has enjoyed success in foodservice, with hospitals stocking the meals for staff working late shifts, for example – but, after going on sale in Total and Pace forecourts and cash & carries, Enterprise is seeking listings in the multiples.

As well as savings on storage and transport, "retailers benefit from the extended shelf life, resulting in less wastage", said Ashton. He added that the range had sold well from chillers – where shoppers expected to find ready meals – and admitted the

company was yet to see how it would perform when stocked in the ambient aisle of a multiple.

Spar trading controller Tina Hird, who sampled the chicken tikka meal, admitted she had been sceptical. "I was pleasantly surprised: the taste and texture of the chicken was perfectly acceptable although the chunks were smaller than the pack illustration" she said. "The rice was well flavoured but the sauce let the product down a little."

Shoppers might not be ready to reassess the ambient fixture when it came to healthiness and taste, said Claire Nuttall, MD of branding agency 1HQ. "If products like these deliver on taste, consumers will be encouraged," she added.

Her views were echoed by Mintel UK food analyst Alex Beckett, who said: "The fact these meals could be located outside chilled or frozen aisles may deter some consumers."