From Minnesota Fat to Seoul Food: Spam in America and the Pacific Rim

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There is nothing intrinsic in food to account for it being valued or despised.
—Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food* (1985)

Watch the pink slab fry,
Its grease can lubricate eggs,
Get ketchup ready.
—Spam Haiku, *Amazing Spam Home Page* (1998)

Spam, since its introduction to American culture by Hormel in 1937, has moved far beyond the status of a mere lunch meat in a can. People now wear the Spam logo on their T-shirts, write Spam-inspired haiku poetry, even carve Spam loaves into intricate pink statuettes. Comedians, from Monty Python to David Letterman, have thrived on Spam skits and jokes. Spamburger commercials are featured items on cable country music shows. Micronesian kids have been named after it. South Koreans honor guests by serving Spam. It has even become a generic term for junk e-mail in cyberspace.

Clearly, Spam today is a key symbolic element of American culture both at home and abroad, taking on similar iconic importance as Elvis, blue jeans, or baseball—as was solemnly intoned by Hormel executives on the occasion of their production of the five billionth blue and yellow can on March 22, 1994. As they noted, after more than fifty years in the marketplace, Spam is still one of the highest volume items sold in American grocery stores, even as it is also trademarked in 92 other countries, while being sold in 45 nations from Anguilla to Zimbabwe (Hormel 1994).

Food—and no matter how much else, culturally, Spam has become, it is also that—nourishes the collective mind as well as the empty stomach. Or, as Claude Lévi-Strauss once put it, some foods are "good to think," while others are "bad to think" (87). In the case of Spam, one might also add "ridiculous to think" to this well-known dictum. Although Spam is taken quite seriously as a "good to think" foodstuff in

many areas of the world—and especially in the Pacific Rim—elsewhere it is also the butt of innumerable jokes, many of which place the alleged lack of sophistication and social worth of Spam lovers at their core. Others, perhaps of a more nutritional bent of mind, are likely to classify Spam, at 256 calories per 4 ounce serving, as "bad to think"; "a nutritionally dangerous heart-attack-in-a-can" (Mennell et al. 41-47).

So how is it that this lowly blue and yellow tin of pressed pork product has become such a cultural lightning rod of attention? And, more interestingly, why is the attention paid it so diverse in nature? What is it that connects Spam so visibly as a valued marker of power and social class to, particularly, peoples of the Pacific Rim? And why does their generally positive valuation of this particular foodstuff differ so vastly from that of most mainland Americans, who are more likely to feel embarrassed, or even perhaps a bit ashamed publicly to admit consuming, much less enjoying, this product?

In the Beginning: Miracle Meat in a Can

In 1891, George Hormel started his meat-packing and canning company in an abandoned Austin, Minnesota, creamery. In 1936, faced with several thousand pounds of pork shoulder in its coolers and no way to commercially move so much of this product before spoilage set in, Hormel decided to grind up the shoulder, add a bit of "real" ham to it, and can it—thus catering to the large (and growing) market for such meat products that had developed, especially in American urban centers and the South. Fittingly, given its subsequent fame as an icon of popular culture, Spam was named by an actor—Keith Daugneau, the brother of a Hormel Foods vice president, at a gala New Year's Eve Party that ushered in its year of commercial introduction to the American public—1937 (Hormel).

Canned lunch meat was not a new product. The possibility of preserving cooked food by placing it in an airtight vessel was first recorded as recognized by an Italian count in the early 1700s (Pillsbury). It was, however, not developed in practice until 1795, when Napoleon, who wished to encourage provisioning innovations that would allow his army more speed and mobility, had the Directory of France offer a 12,000-franc prize for such an innovation. In 1809 Nicholas Appart—a chef, pickler, and brewer—developed a practical enough application of this concept to claim the prize (Tannahill 1973). The French tried to keep this canning method a secret, but it was soon figured out, in 1811, by Peter Durand, an Englishman who sold his modified patent to a company that provided the British Royal Navy. The method, in 1820, was brought to America by William Underwood, who began by canning fish in Boston,

but later moved profitably to the creation of "Deviled Ham," a direct American precursor to Spam (Bryant).

This canning of meat, especially important for armies, was perfected in America during the Civil War and has, since that time, been associated in American minds with military life. After the Civil War, as America urbanized in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the costs of canning dropped dramatically. This method of mass preserving of relatively cheap chopped, ground, and boiled meats also allowed new immigrants and the poorer urban workers, who for various reasons were not able to locate or purchase fresh meat, to include it in their diets (R. Harris). Thus, in addition to the military connection, canned meats became associated with the underclass in America—cheap, low-status meat that, because of its transformation in the canning process, lost the positive, higher-status association that plentiful fresh meat has traditionally held in American culture (Fiddes, Rifkin). Canned luncheon meat had become an everyday, lower-middle-class, mass-marketed product with, as it turned out, a very bright future.

Spam, packaged in its easily identifiable, blue and yellow oblong can, took advantage of this market with an aggressive promotional campaign, begun in the late 1930s. Advertised as the perfect food for breakfast, lunch, dinner, or even between-meal snacks, Spam was the subject of what was touted as the first singing radio commercial, aired in 1940 by Hormel (1995):

> Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam
> Hormel's new miracle meal in a can,
> Tastes fine, saves time,
> Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam.

In that same year, George Burns and Gracie Allen endorsed Spam and began to advertise it on their nationwide radio show. By 1941, 40 million pounds of the product had been sold.

America's entry into World War II created an even larger bonanza for Hormel and Spam. Not only were civilians in the United States told they could help the war effort by conserving beef and consuming Spam—which they did in huge quantities—but, as with tinned meats in earlier wars, huge amounts of Spam were shipped overseas to feed the Allied troops. Over 100 million pounds of Spam were shipped to both the European and Pacific theaters, introducing peoples all over the world to this American product while, at the same time, indelibly linking it to the American war effort.

In addition to their weekly radio show, George Burns and Gracie Allen promoted SPAM® Luncheon Meat in a series of print advertisements that appeared nationally in the early 1940s (Hormel publicity photo).

American Spam: Pride or Embarrassment?

After World War II, Hormel kept Spam in the media spotlight with a campaign that maintained its wartime patriotic associations, while at the same time connecting these associations to the safe-but-sexy image of the all-American girl. This was done with the help of a 60-member performing troupe known as "The Hormel Girls," which performed its musical and comedy revue throughout the country (much as similar troupes had entertained the troops during the war). The Hormel Girls also engaged in promotion and distribution of samples of Spam in supermarkets and "surprise" door-to-door appearances. As well, Spam was featured in the Hormel Girls national radio show, which aired on Sunday evenings in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This massive image-making campaign was extremely effective. By 1958, Spam had captured 41 percent of all category sales (Hormel 1994) and, in 1950, Hormel produced (and advertised heavily) its one billionth blue and yellow can of Spam luncheon meat.

Hormel's attempt to position Spam as a highly visible "good to think" product of choice of the great American heartland had succeeded. Millions of American males ogled the clean-cut and cute Hormel Girls in their revue tours. Their families laughed along with the Spam radio comedy routines on Sunday nights. And everyone was familiar with the friendly jingle: "Cold or hot, Spam hits the spot!"

And yet, like other highly identifiable icons of the American heartland, Spam began to take on an ambiguity of meaning during the ensuing decades. As the American public changed, so did their collective evaluation of Spam. A term coined by folklorist Simon Bronner (1983) in another context perhaps best sums it up: Spam became, paradoxically, a symbol of both pride and loathing for the American public. Or, stated in another way, most Americans had come to connect Spam symbolically to an earlier time of innocent-but-hokey pride and patriotism—something to be collectively embarrassed about but, at the same time, secretly prideful. Spam became a symbol of the past—a simple, unsophisticated time that, in the 1990s, some Americans made public fun of while others wished to return to.

These two impulses were, many times, held by the same people, and at the same time. As Bronner states, with respect to food orientations and habits, "human behavior and thought involves processes which allow for a variety of orientations—polarities so to speak—which are comprised of elements, one of which may become prominent momentarily while others recede, only to give way to those temporarily ignored or suppressed. Individuals thinking these opposing thoughts may or may not recognize the paradox...and may resolve it temporarily in various ways" (Bronner 122).

One of the ways these sorts of paradoxes are temporarily resolved is through humor. Urban Americans love to lampoon condescendingly their rural heartland—being "corny as Kansas in August" has a multiple meaning not lost upon its audiences. Herb Caen, the late columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, had a long-running series of jokes and commentaries about Chico (a northern California, semi-rural community), whose supermarkets supposedly stock Velveeta cheese in their gourmet food sections. The same sort of ambivalence that makes Velveeta "funny" is also at work with Spam, a recipe for which appears in the tongue-in-cheek *White Trash Cooking* (1986), a national best-seller published in Berkeley, California, which has been described by its cosmopolitan reviewers as "a real pan-fried book" that "makes you want to spit in yer skillet and start cookin'."

Spam is also marketed as an image imprinted on tennis balls, license plate frames, boxer shorts, and computer mouse pads (Cahn), artifacts that are normally thought of as status markers of the upper middle class. Hormel's own catalog, which carries these and other "Spamwear" products, was begun by the company as a lark in 1992. Almost overnight, they were flooded with orders for everything from Spam polyester bowling shirts to miniature models of Spam racing cars. Business became so heavy that Hormel contracted with a mail order company, Direct Mark, to handle it all (Cobb).

Not only are these Spam-related products now available directly from the catalog, they can also be purchased on the Internet. And, speaking of the Net, there are also several Spam sites on the World Wide Web, including the Spam haiku (Spamku) site—which currently has nearly 10,000 haiku, submitted by Spam-loving net surfers, defined as "anyone who comes under the influence of this enigmatic porcine muse"; the church of Spam—with hymns, sermons and the twelve Spammandments ("thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's Spam"); and sites where one can watch visuals of cans of Spam exploding, or wedges of it slowly rotting on a plate. Spam has also become a disparaging term, used on the Net to refer to unsolicited mass e-mailings that can promote everything from get-rich-quick schemes to porn sites. On the Net, ESAD (Eat Spam And Die) is now a common retort to such mailings. This has not amused Hormel, who doesn't mind the "ridiculous to think" spoofs and light poking of fun, but does not want their product connected with cyberjunk and the "bad to think" anger it produces. In reaction, they have attempted legally to squelch the use of Spam and its image by folks like "Spamford" Wallace, the self-anointed Spam King of junk e-mail. Wallace wishes them luck in attempting to change the vocabulary of 30 million Internet users, and has registered the e-mail domain names spamford.net and spamford.com (*Philadelphia Inquirer*).

Bob Gorman, a software programmer unassociated with this controversy, and who created Page O'Spam as a web site (which documents an imaginary Nazi-Spam conspiracy), also admits to eating it—once a year—at an annual Spam and Beer Tasting held by a Boston home brewers' group. Recently, the Spam molé and Spam lo mein were particularly tasty, he reported to *Boston Globe* writer Nathan Cobb (Cobb). But these imaginative delicacies are perhaps outdone by Pig Newtons—crescent rolls filled with the lovable lunchmeat—conjured up by Mary Anne McQuillan, who also handcrafts earrings from Spam cans as gifts for her friends. In still another quirky twist, Spam has been demonstrated by Jay Leno, on the *Tonight Show*, as an effective form of hair gel.

At the same time that Spam is lampooned as "ridiculous to think" in American popular culture, it is also held up as the brave symbol of a rural, small town past. Country singer T. Graham Brown wears a Spam luncheon meat key around his neck and uses the image of the product to "connect" with his rural, small town musical constituency (as well as providing camp comic relief to his urban cowboy audience). In Austin, Texas, the annual Spamarama has been held for over twenty years now. Begun by a small group to celebrate Spam on Fat Tuesday (Mardi Gras), it has grown to a food festival that attracts over 12,000 annually, and features a Spam Run, Spam Music Jam, and Spam Cook-off, with entries such as an eight-foot-long Spam Sub Sandwich and Spamish Fly (diced Spam, cheddar cheese, mayonnaise and raisins [flies]).

The Hormel Company also sponsors a state and county fair recipe contest held, in 1997, at 66 different rural fairs across the United States. The winners at the San Joaquin, California, County Fair were "Braveheart's Wee Haggis (with Spam)" and "Pine Nut, Sundried Tomato and Spam Pizza" (*Stockton Record*), recipes that went on to the national contest, the winner of which received a trip for two to the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota. In Seattle, at Pioneer Square, an annual People's Spam-carving contest is held, with prizes having gone to sculptures entitled "Spam Henge" and "Spammy Wynette," among others. Finally, in Augusta, Maine, a woman reports that, on a trip with her children to Washington, D.C., White House security guards hustled her into a private room for a grilling when their metal detectors revealed an object in her purse that turned out not to be a bomb, but a can of Spam that she planned to serve for lunch to her hungry children. Jay Leno and Herb Caen would have a tough time "out-camping" these *serious* symbolic uses of Spam as icon of small town America.

In addition to its hokey image, Spam also carries the stigma in the 1990s of being perceived as a "bad to think" fatty foodstuff that, in urban America especially, is eaten mostly by the poor. With quick, effi-

cient transportation of foodstuffs and effective freezing techniques, most middle- and upper-class Americans today do not eat canned food—especially meats—as they were far more likely to do in the 1950s (Bryant 126-27). Canned foods, donated to the poor during Thanksgiving and Christmas charity drives, are likely seen in the 1990s, then, as the cheap foods of the urban poor, who have actually consumed them in quantity since the late 1800s and early 1900s (Jerome).

And, if that weren't enough, Spam has to many the image of an artificially created product. It is not a "real" animal meat, like beef, or even ham. Nor is it a symbolically "real" animal meat, like hamburger or hot dogs. Instead, it lies somewhere in between, a "bad to think," ground up and reconstituted product that claims to be part pork and part ham. What else might it be, as well? This American suspicion of ground up and disguised meat products—the "mystery meat" syndrome—is amplified by the many urban rumors that circulate about rats and other vermin showing up in commercially created and distributed foodstuffs (Brunvand, Fine), as well as in Spam's longtime military connection, that brings on forced and unappetizing images of meals such as chipped beef or canned Spam on toast—labeled "shit on a shingle" as early as World War II.

In sum, then, Spam is seen in mainland America today in an ambivalent and paradoxical fashion. It is hokey, old-fashioned, lower class and artificial ("ridiculous" and "bad to think"). Yet, at the same time, it stands for thrift, naive patriotism, and other conservative small town American values ("good to think"). As such, it is—especially for younger, urban, and more affluent Americans—an icon of potential public cultural embarrassment that, deep down, may well also symbolize a simplistic past that, for good or ill, America feels it has lost collective touch with.

Hawaii: Spam Goes Local

In the dark smoky music clubs outside of tourist-oriented Waikiki, where the locals congregate, one commonly sees finger foods of choice advertised on little stand-up table menus. Along with the expected offerings of nachos and fries and chips, a featured item is very often Spam, a food not normally associated with such venues by most mainland Americans. Indeed, as one begins to move from mainland America westward across the Pacific, this salty tinned pork meat can be seen to take on major importance as a "good to think" icon of American popular culture.

The state of Hawaii leads the United States on a per capita consumption basis, accounting for close to five million cans of Spam—or close to five cans per year, per resident (Hormel). As Rachel Landan says in her

The Food of Paradise, "to take on Spam is to pick at all the ethnic and economic seams of Hawaii, even though to newcomers, to nutritionists, to those with pretensions to gourmet status, Spam is an embarrassment—serviceable during wartime rationing perhaps, but too salty, too fatty, too overprocessed to be eaten in these enlightened times" (1996, 66).

And yet for locals, whose grandparents may well have worked on the pineapple and sugar cane plantations of the early 1900s, canned Spam (and canned sardines) were a welcome addition to a limited diet that became a central and symbolically rich element of family recipes and thus, of family history—a history that has now expanded to include many other blue-collar Hawaiians, whether they can trace direct ties to the plantations or not. Spam, thus, has become a symbol not only of local pride and continuity, but of the ability to appropriate the culture of the exploiter and to turn it into an artifact of local identity, much as the Chinese in Beijing are now doing, as they "localize" McDonald's hamburgers (Yan, "McDonald's").

Locals in Hawaii, then, regard Spam as both thrifty and tasty—a remembered food of childhood, of family meals and picnics at the beach. As John DeSoto, a Honolulu City Council member said

When I was a kid, we always had rice and nori and Spam around the house, and we would eat those things in various ways...when there were leftovers, we created a kind of sandwich...a family recipe we called a DeSpamwich.... This

Polynesian Stir Fry (Hormel publicity photo).

taught me a valuable lesson—to make something good you don't always have to use conventional things in conventional ways. Sometimes, by using what is available and a little imagination, you can create something just as good, sometimes even better. (Hawaii 130)

Hawaiians, then, have given Spam a central place in their culinary life. Perhaps most commonly, it is fried and served with rice (and possibly eggs) for breakfast, lunch, and dinner (Lum 1988). It is also wrapped in ti leaves (or aluminum foil) and left to roast in the ashes of beachside cooking fires while everyone goes fishing. It is cooked in soy sauce and ginger and served on toothpicks for cocktails. It is a standard topping for saimin noodle dishes, as well as an often-used ingredient in macaroni and cheese (Landan). Even Spam's ability to be carved—a "ridiculous to think" quality on the American mainland—is "good to think" in Hawaii, as it allows Spam to be easily shaped for sushi and musabi (*Honolulu Advertiser*).

In a word, having been "localized" simultaneously by the various and diverse cultural and ethnic groups that make up Hawaii, Spam is unique, in that it is not specific to any one of these groups. This allows it to be one of the fun foodstuffs of Hawaii that can be seen, symbolically, as a cultural unifier. Spam cuts across—and unifies—the multi-ethnic cuisines and cultures of Hawaii. Moreover, it does so by invoking the humble and local roots of the culture, while at the same time reminding locals of how they are able to appropriate the culture of the exploiter and turn it into local meaning. No wonder the governor referred in his recent State of the State address to the legislature as a "Spam-and-rice kind of speech." As Michael Young has remarked in *Fighting with Food*, "food has the lowest common denominator and the greatest ease of convertibility of any valuable, and as a species of wealth it is crucial to the working of most indigenous political systems" (146). Nowhere is this likely more evident than in the case of Spam in Hawaii.

Spam: Power in the Pacific

The ambivalence of meaning that Spam has for mainland Americans does not seem to have been translated to its Pacific Rim consumers, even though these cultures were introduced to Spam by Americans themselves—many by military personnel from World War II on. As cultural anthropologists Mary Douglas and Michael Nicod have remarked: "Food categories encode social events.... They express hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries (745). Understanding these encoded expressions, particularly ones dealing with transactions across social (and political) boundaries, is the key to understanding Spam's place in the Pacific.

These Island societies spread out across the Pacific like a tossed handful of deep green jewels, each sparkling with its own unique culture. Despite their range of cultural diversity, however, Pacific societies also are strikingly similar with regard to their traditional foods, as well as the way new foodstuffs—such as Spam—have been adopted. The cultures of these Pacific Islands use food as a major vehicle for the teaching of traditions, as an indicator of kinship and other social relationships, and as a currency for the exchange of wealth. As anthropologists Miriam Kahn and Lorraine Sexton have said: "To Pacific Islanders, food is of far more than nutritional interest, it is of utmost cultural concern" (1).

As these countries have become more tightly integrated into the world economy, their food habits have continued to evolve. Through explorers, traders, military campaigns, and—most recently—multinational corporations, Pacific Islanders have been influenced as they have been exposed to new and exotic (to them) foodstuffs. As some of these have been absorbed into their own societies, Islanders have adopted them symbolically to their own cultural needs—as well as having, all too often, been forced into producing cash crops for these outside economic interests, in order to pay for the newly desirable foodstuffs—pineapple in Hawaii, sugar cane in the Philippines, coffee in Ponape, even "harvesting" tuna from the sea and preparing it for canning in Baleau. This "gustatory subversion," as David Lewis terms it (81) has allowed Pacific Island cultures to acquire Western goods and foodstuffs, such as Spam—but sometimes at a high cost to their pre-contact cultural integrity as well as their current economic well-being. For example, in Micronesia, the value of imports exceeded exports by 2 to 1 in 1961. By 1975, it had increased to 15 to 1, and on some islands, such as Guam, 100 percent of food (even fish) is now imported (Stanley).

Although there had been commercial contact with American foodstuffs prior to 1940, the successes of the Allied military effort in the Pacific theater during World War II gave an intense and up-close introduction to many Pacific cultures of things American. Military personnel spread throughout the various island groups and were viewed, in the main, in a positive light—if only in contrast to the Japanese. These new occupiers were powerful and technologically sophisticated—bringing (and many times sharing) elements of their culture with the locals. Beer, chewing gum, military rations—including tinned meats such as Spam—became valuable artifacts of the most recent occupying culture, and prized as such by the locals (Stanley). In the Micronesian Islands, as one evidence of this, are the many documented cases of children conceived during this period being named "Cigarette," "Gum," "Spam," and "Love Me," among other Americanisms of the time (Nevin).

In some countries, this occupation and "liberation" was felt more intensely than others. In the Philippines, where there had been a strong American naval presence since 1898, Douglas MacArthur's famous "return" to the liberated nation in 1945 promoted great joy and an increased emulation of things American on the part of many Filipinos, who prior to World War II, had been exposed to this culture for half a century. The strategic importance of the Philippines during and just after the war only intensified this cultural connection. Even though the Philippines were granted formal independence from American rule on July 4, 1946, America provided (among other large economic boosts) the second largest payroll in the country at its military bases until 1992 (Fallows 370). And, of course, among other American artifacts that Filipinos warmly embraced was Spam, the canned lunchmeat that was ubiquitous on American military bases and quickly found its way (along with Coca Cola, beer, and chewing gum) into the hands of the local population.

Spam became then, for many Pacific Islanders, "good to think"—a prized artifact, emblematic of the technologically advanced, militarily powerful, liberating Allied forces (most of whom, in this theater of war, were identifiably American). To American soldiers and sailors, Spam had no special allure. It was PX food—something they saw every day and would bitch, good-naturedly, about. It was certainly not a food of choice for most of them, but it was cheap and easily attainable. If locals desired it, why not give it away for favors and good will? Or use it for barter? Or, later, if one was enterprising and had access to military stores, why not dump it on the emerging black market (especially in the Philippines) and make some good (but illegal) profits from it? All these things occurred as Spam became a symbolic medium of exchange in transactions across social and political boundaries in the Pacific—moving from a cultural context in which it was defined as low status, cheap and everyday food, to one in which it encoded the power and status of the liberating forces—a talisman emblematic of freedom and wealth. As David Lewis observed in these cultures, if food is defined as the "essence" of its producer, then consuming the food of Westerners, and integrating it into one's culture, gives great power. As he said of those in the Gilbert Islands: "Two features stand out when these people remember World War II; the awesome power used to dislodge the Japanese from Tarawa, and the mountains of food, tobacco and beer which the Americans generously shared with the Gilbertese" (Lewis 90).

Obviously, Spam was not the only mass-produced American item brought to the Pacific by the war effort that diffused through these island cultures. What was it about this particular product, in addition to its American aura, that caused it to be so quickly and centrally adopted?

In many Pacific countries (as opposed to Europe and America), meat has traditionally been a relatively scarce and rare item (Sahlins). Particularly in island cultures, with their circumscribed land areas and limited food resources, animals that exist high on the food chain are very expensive to keep. To consume them—or to offer them to others for consumption—is very likely to be the mark of economic wealth and high status. Historically, such animals would have had to have been imported to these islands and, in general, it made little sense to do so.

For example, horses and cows would not be functional in such cultures (M. Harris). Such large animals ate too much, and there were not grazing lands on most islands to supply them. Too, there was no need of these animals as either means of transportation on such limited land area, or as plowers of crops where only small plots were traditionally planted.

Dogs, smaller animals, were, on the other hand, omnivores, and so would compete with humans for scarce meat supplies. Although they do show up on some of the islands, they were affordable only for the wealthy and in limited numbers (Ishige). For example, in Hawaii and Tahiti, only priests and aristocrats were normally allowed to consume dogflesh (Harris, "Good to Eat" 181).

Pigs, however, worked very well. They could forage and obtain their own vegetarian food from the land (as well as scraps discarded by humans). They could also eat fish scraps, something there might well be a surplus of in many island cultures. Pork, then, in these countries could easily become a meat of choice and high status—central to cultural holidays, family ceremonies, and other times of sharing and gift giving (Fisher, Meggitt). Pork, the very essence of Spam, then, was to many Pacific Islanders a culturally familiar, high-status foodstuff, packaged by cultural outsiders in a unique way, with only corned beef, brought at times in the past by trading ships, being any type of analog (Rody). As James Bindon said of Samoa, "in the hierarchy of flesh foods for this culture, pig alone stands at the top" (76).

The method of packaging—the tin can—was a final, telling influence in defining Spam as a high-status food. In tropical cultures without refrigeration or many other means of preserving food, what is not eaten immediately often spoils. Therefore, although the wealthy could kill a pig for a feast, the event was immediate, communal, and soon over (Barnett 29). Pork meat could not, in general, be kept, saved or stockpiled as a symbol of wealth. (Living pigs could, but even though they did forage, they also required feed and thus were expensive enough that there was a limit to the number anyone could reasonably possess and support. Giving them as gifts was also problematic, as the recipient had to have the means of maintaining the animal, or be faced with having to slaughter it immediately for a feast day himself.)

With Spam, then, came the ability to preserve a scarce resource—to stockpile it as a symbol of wealth, to give it to a far wider range of individuals as a gift than one could a living pig, to make finer distinctions (given the small size of a can of Spam, in contrast to a whole pig) in the value of gifts, and to use it as a medium of barter and exchange. The very wealthy could still raise pigs and use them in traditional ways, but Spam was—although not cheap for Pacific Islanders—more affordable and certainly far more versatile for symbolic and economic transactions, even as these transactions tied them ever more securely to the monetary exchange system of America and the West (Nevin). As David Lewis has remarked, with respect to the Gilbert Islands, "if fishing is not successful, high status food can still be eaten—the purchase of a can of corned beef or pork makes it no longer necessary to maintain fish ponds" (92).

Consider then the impact on these Pacific cultures of a non-perishable, easily portable, form of pork meat that could be stocked as wealth like money in the bank, saved up, or purchased and given as gifts. Consider also that this item was introduced by the liberating troops of the powerful, technologically advanced, and culturally fascinating West, as iconic of their society. No wonder that in the Pacific Islands, from Majuro to Manila, Spam is socially powerful, "good to think" food—thought of and used very differently than it is in mainland America.

Spam, Social Class and Respect in Korea

Although Spam is popular in the Pacific Islands, it is South Korea that has accorded this luncheon meat its highest, "good to think" status. Presently the world's fastest growing market for this product, Korea is the leading foreign importer of Spam, as well as the country that has its most productive local contracted producer, Cheil Sugar (Hormel 1995). In Korea, where it has been said there is more grocery shelf space devoted to tinned lunchmeat than to soy sauce (Darlin), Spam is not only as popular as other mass-produced and imported American foodstuffs such as Coca Cola and Kentucky Fried Chicken, it outranks such products substantially, status-wise. As such, it has become an extremely popular gift, to be given on occasions of importance when one wishes to pay special honor and proper respect. High-status import departments of establishments such as the huge Lotte World Department Store in Seoul display cans of Spam in tasteful, up-scale packaging, alongside imported French wines, Swiss chocolates, and exotic, wild pine mushrooms. What is it about this ground-up, pressed, and tinned pork shoulder that causes Koreans to accord it such status?

As in the Pacific Islands, there are likely several factors at play, the most immediately obvious being Spam's introduction to the country by

the U.S. military during the post-World War II occupation and, in the early 1950s, the Korean War. As the American military presence has remained substantial in South Korea since the war, so has the presence of Spam on American military bases and in their PXs. Similarly to Guam and (especially) the Philippines, Spam has been symbolic of America as military protector as well as, during the postwar years, economic benefactor of the country. The American presence in Korea has been strong and high profile for over five decades, and a foodstuff that—during the war years—was freely handed out and shared by the American military with the near-starving South Korean civilian population has taken on great symbolic significance for that reason alone.

Since the war, as in the Pacific Islands, Spam has been used by American G.I.s to trade for favors and for general bartering. And, as in the Philippines, a strong black market in American military-base Spam has developed in Korea. Although no one knows for sure how much Spam is diverted in this way, it is obvious that the operation is quite large. According to sales figures on Army bases, about 500,000 pounds of Spam are being sold annually to (supposedly) 60,000 authorized PX buyers, almost all of whom are American military personnel. Were this actually true, then a group that collectively delights in denigrating Spam as low status and practically inedible is voluntarily consuming over eight pounds, on average, per year—and that over and above base rations! Not likely. In a survey done in the late 1980s by Cheil Sugar—which manufactures Spam in South Korea—it was estimated that about 400,000 of those 500,000 annual pounds are going directly into the Korean black market (Darlin).

The market is also augmented by what is termed "grey market" Spam—brought in from American supermarket warehouses in Hawaii and the West Coast by the shipload, without the permission of Hormel (Darlin). In addition, South Korean and Japanese companies are producing "counterfeit" Spam (one brand of which is called Lo-Spam) and other locally produced knock-offs, including one by Cheil Sugar itself, which wisely figures that in this intense, trademark-unprotected market, if you can't stop them, you better join them for, at least, a piece of the action.

This market is driven, to a great extent, by the fact that meat has traditionally been considered a foodstuff of high status in Korea. Because of this country being a peninsula rather than an island—and thus being able to feed and support larger grazing animals—Koreans are used to more meat in their diet than many Pacific Rim and Island countries. Even so, most is—for the average person—reserved for special events and occasions, with a good deal more being eaten by those in the upper classes than in the low (Osgood).

Koreans are likely descended from nomadic tribes of Mongolia and Caucasians of West Asia. They were horsemen in a mountainous country, who were fond of feasting and dancing. Although the country was not suitable for livestock, hunting was popular and cows and pigs were raised on a small scale (Yan, "History"). Because of the early Buddhist influence from China, there was a period when meat dishes were not common, although the earlier Korean heritage gave a base, in the mid-Koryo period (700s), for high-quality cattle ranches to be developed on Cheju Island, and meat began to take its place in Korean diets again. Although roasted prime rib (*solya myokchok*) began to be served at this time, the more common ways of serving meat were as jerky, in thin slices cut from roasts, or in steamed foods (Hyun).

Meat, then, has been an important part of Korean cuisine, though a relatively expensive part, with a long tradition of use by the upper classes and for special occasions—a point noted by the anthropologist Kan In-Hee in his description of traditional Korean "field meals." For the lower class, these meals were eaten during rural workdays, outside,

Spam Gift Packs in Korea. Copyright 1997, George H. Lewis.

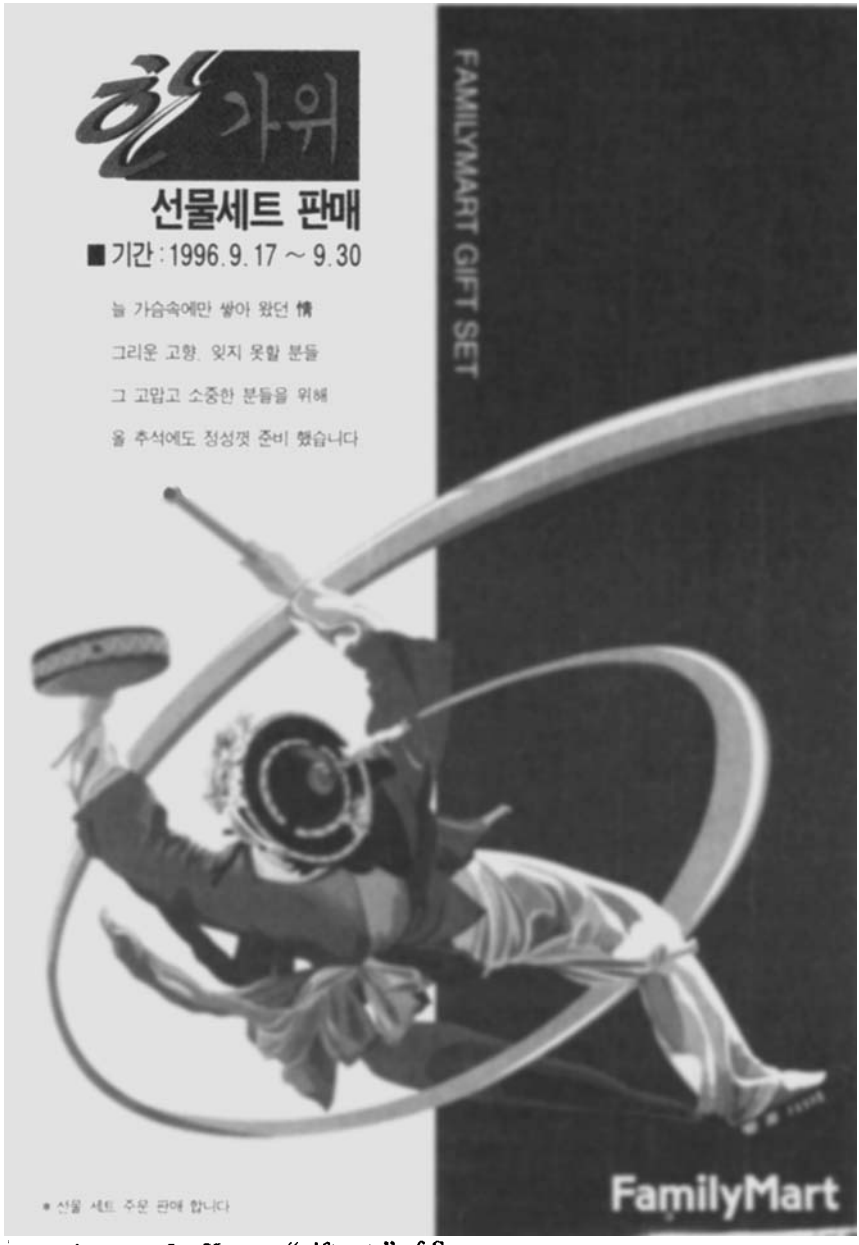
and revolved around soybean cakes as a central food item. For the upper classes, "field meals" were eaten outdoors while hiking and "assimilating" with nature (nibbling fried flowers of the same type one was admiring in bloom was a common practice). For these upper-class meals, sliced meat or jerky was a central item that took the place of the lower-class soybean cake.

A common meat dish dating from this time period, and still popular today, is *p'you yuk*, an important precursor to Spam in Korean culture. *P'you yuk* is a large piece of beef or pork, which can come from any part of the animal. The meat is boiled, covered with a cloth, and then pressed into a loaf. Finally, it is cut into thin slices and eaten with seasoned sesame sauce or fermented shrimp sauce. It often is used, among other ceremonial occasions, as table food in the traditional 15-year-old coming-of-age ceremony (Park). It was likely no large step for Koreans, then, to move from this traditional dish to Spam, with its similar ingredients, looks, and method of preparation, when Americans later introduced it to their culture.

In addition to there being a tradition of using meat to mark special, high-status occasions, and the fact there is a way of preparing pork or beef in Korea that makes it very similar to Spam, there is another, more culturally symbolic, way in which this lunchmeat fits Korean culture. Traditionally seen as somewhat xenophobic in nature, Korea has con-

Spam in Korean gift pack.

stantly had to deal with powerful and insistent cultures—historically, China and Japan, and now America (Oliver). The United States has, since the end of World War II, occupied a large amount of Korea's mental space—with a huge military compound located (until the early 1990s) in the heart of Seoul; with American network TV and radio



Advertisement for Korean "gift sets" of Spam.

broadcast direct over Korean airwaves; and with a large number of the urban labor force employed in "sweatshop" factories producing American goods, from decorative hairbows and stuffed animals to compact disc players. It is no wonder there is such a fascination with American popular culture in Korea.

Yet, at the same time, there is also ambivalence about things American. Just as there is a good deal of anti-Japanese feeling in Korea, there is also anti-American sentiment—to a large extent because such a fascination with foreign culture is perceived as leading to a weakening of Korean society and cultural integrity, a process that has been worriedly guarded against for centuries in this country. The current political environment in Korea only emphasizes this longstanding concern (Bak). In the area of food preferences, this issue can be seen reflected in a recent article that proposed that the "traditional Korean diet, which over time has been developed to suit the people and the climate, can only be preserved if our descendants remain faithful to tradition. These days many Korean children prefer foreign foods like pizzas, hamburgers and Coca Cola.... We need to teach them about our good food" (Han 43).

Such "official" concern only makes foreign luxury goods appear more desirous to many Koreans who can afford them and who enjoy the thrill of cultural rebellion and the status that owning such potentially controversial goods can bring (Robison and Goodman). As an example, when the government raised the price of large White-Westinghouse refrigerators from $1,800 to $4,200, the new rich kept on buying them. And when the government objected to the amount of imported wine being purchased in Seoul, Korean media publicized the purchase of a $1,909 bottle of rare imported cognac by a local connoisseur (Fallows 382-83).

In this atmosphere, a foreign item with a relatively moderate price that also fits into the Korean culinary tradition, as does Spam, is almost a perfect cultural fit. Spam can, at the same time, symbolize America and the lure of luxury goods from overseas, while also affirming (or at least meshing with) traditional Korean dietary culture, which already values similar meat products as appropriate for special occasions and as symbolic of high status. In Korean society, sharing food promotes solidarity not only among the living, but also between the ancestors and their descendants. Foods that are shared, then, must be familiar to the ancestors—or at least similar enough that they can be substituted in traditional dishes. Spam, then, can be both American and Korean, moderately daring and traditional at the same time. And, in the best Korean manner, it defies status hierarchies and cultural classifications imported from outside. Spam is highly valued, but it is *not* French wine, rare mushrooms,

nor Swiss chocolate. At the same time, it is also *not* pizza, hamburger, nor Coca Cola—it is far more special than those other mass-mediated American foodstuffs, even as it fits comfortably into traditional food categories.

Added to traditional dishes like *kim chi*, a highly spiced fermented cabbage dish, or rolled up with rice inside seaweed in the manner of sushi (*kimpap*), Spam infuses these everyday Korean staples with significance and meaning—and makes them appropriate for special occasions. For gifts on important and traditional days such as the Harvest Moon Festival, Spam is a popular and appropriate choice, gift wrapped and packaged in special ways—perhaps in a scrolled and embossed nine-can box, or a blue vinyl briefcase containing six cans, or a canister gift set of Spam, sugar, and monosodium glutamate (Bak). But however it is presented, in Korea, one can be assured that Spam is a "good to think" gift reflective of both status and respect—a far cry, indeed, from how it is viewed in America, its country of origin. And that is just fine with Koreans. As Ha-Dae Jung, manager of processed meat products for Cheil Sugar says: "In Korea, Spam is consumed by the rich because of its image as a foreign brand.... As a gift, it shows respect and is very impressive" (Darlin).

Conclusion: From Public Embarrassment to Personal Respect

As the anthropologist Jack Goody has noted, "A salient feature of the culinary cultures of the major societies of Europe and Asia is their association with hierarchical man...the allocation of specific foods to specific roles, offices or classes" (97). When a foodstuff such as Spam, which was deliberately developed and designed for long life and hard travel, moves from one society to another, its symbolic meaning, and its connections in the hierarchies of the various societies it diffuses to, can be radically different (Davidson).

The same product that is slathered with cheap mayonnaise and slapped between two slices of store-bought balloon bread in a Chicago, Illinois, tenement apartment is also pulled from the hot ashes of a fire for a family picnic at Makaha Beach, Hawaii, and given by an auto dealer as a gift to a middle-class Chamorro who purchases a car in Agana, Guam. Further across the Pacific, and higher up the social class scale, it is carefully added to an elaborate vegetable and pork dish, *Kujol Pan*, at an exclusive private party in Pusan, South Korea.

Spam has come a long way from that 1936 Austin, Minnesota, pork shoulder surplus and the decision by Hormel to grind it up and stuff it in a can. This humble luncheon meat means many things in many cultures, from "ridiculous" and "bad" to think to decidedly "good to think," from

public embarrassment to personal respect. From Minnesota fat to Seoul food, Spam has been seen variously as a cheap staple, a cultural joke, a patriotic icon, and as a symbol of wealth and power as it has made its curious journey from America to the cultures across the Pacific.

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