

Additional words Laura Price
Recipes Abigail Spooner
Photographs Frankie Turner
Food styling Rosie Reynolds
Styling Max Robinson

CAN

YES YOU

Tinned food has travelled the world, made itself at home in our storecupboards and transformed our diets. *Susan Low* reveals how a clever invention went on to change the way we eat forever

A collection of various metal food cans is arranged on a blue surface against a blue background. On the left, two tall, ribbed cans are stacked, with the top one tilted and its lid partially open. In the center, a smooth, cylindrical can lies on its side with its lid removed. To the right, another ribbed can stands upright with its lid open, and a smaller, smooth can sits in front of it. The lighting creates bright highlights and shadows on the metallic surfaces.

**‘TINNED FOOD
WOULD HAVE SEEMED A
MIND-BLOWING MARVEL
WHEN IT WAS INVENTED SOME
225 YEARS
AGO’**

“APRIL is the cruellest month,” proclaimed TS Eliot in his poem *The Waste Land*, prompting generations of scholars to ponder the meaning of his words. But gardeners know exactly what Eliot meant. April is ‘hungry gap’ time, when the cold, muddy ground yields little nourishment despite the strengthening sunshine, copious rain and the gardener’s best efforts. “Winter kept us warm,” Eliot wrote, “covering earth in forgetful snow, feeding a little life with dried tubers.”

By April, we’re all heartily sick of the sight of said dried tubers and more needy than ever of warmth-giving sustenance, especially the sort that can be served up with minimum fuss. The obvious solution? Reach for the can opener. Just a few quick turns and you’ll be rewarded with all manner of simple pleasures – baked beans on a thick slice of butter-slathered toast, or a bowl of tomato soup with a steamy fug that will banish spring chills.

Today, tinned food is ubiquitous. The average UK household buys 600 tins a year. But a metal-encased foodstuff would have seemed a mind-blowing marvel when it was invented some 225 years ago.

There is some evidence that food was preserved in cans by the Dutch navy from around 1770, but canning didn’t become a commercial enterprise until after the French got involved.

At the turn of the 18th century, the French and British were skirmishing on land and sea, and malnutrition onboard ships was commonplace. The French government decided it needed a solution: in 1795, Napoleon Bonaparte’s Ministry of the

Interior offered a 12,000-franc prize to anyone who could come up with a new way to preserve food for long sea voyages. A young chef from the Champagne region, Nicolas Appert, cannily repurposed the heavy glass bottles used for the region’s famed fizz, resealing them with a mixture of cheese and lime and using heat to sterilise the contents. Bingo! His provisions were soon heading out to sea with the French navy.

In Britain, a merchant called Peter Durand was awarded a patent in 1810 for preserving food, this time using tin-plated cans. He sold the patent for a tidy sum two years later and the purchasers

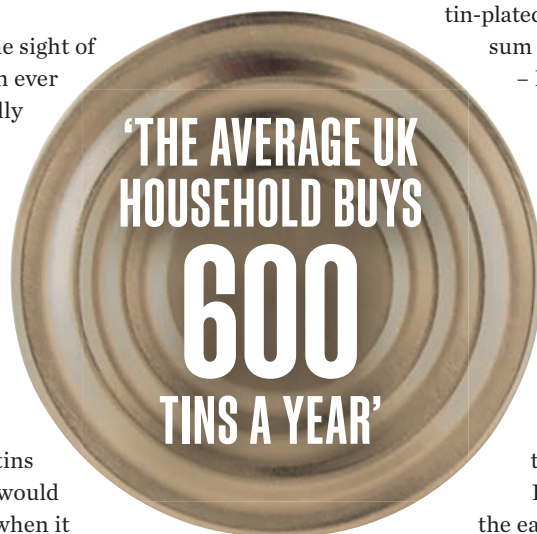
– Donkin, Hall and Gamble – set up the first commercial tinning factory in 1813 in London’s Bermondsey; the company was soon supplying the Royal Navy. Warfare and its corollary, imperialism, further fuelled the rise of tinned food. “Canning technology seriously contributed to the strength of western armies and navies, and indirectly fostered western territorial expansion,” notes the *Oxford Companion to Food*.

Explorers carried tinned food to the earth’s furthest-flung corners. Tins

from Donkin, Hall and Gamble accompanied

Sir William Parry and his men on their 1824-25 expedition to find the Northwest Passage. The expedition was not a success, but the tins survived. One containing veal, opened in 1939, was pronounced to be “in perfect condition, and the larger pieces looked like recently cooked veal”.

It was a different story for the disastrous Franklin Expedition of 1845, in which all 129 men perished. Lead



ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS ADOBE STOCK, ALAMY

THE TIN TIMELINE

1809 The process of storing food in airtight, heat-sealed glass bottles was invented by Nicolas Appert in France.

1855 The first can opener was patented in the UK.

1886 Heinz Baked Beans went on sale at Fortnum & Mason in London.



1895 The first tin of ready-to-eat soup was introduced by the Campbell's company.

1918 Canned rations, including bully beef and the infamous Maconochie's stew (made of beef, turnips and carrots), became soldiers' staples during the First World War.



1941 Spam arrived in the UK from the US. British Spam was made in Liverpool until 1988, when production was taken over by the Danish Crown group. »

poisoning caused by badly soldered food tins was initially blamed, though experts continue to disagree about the true cause of the men's demise – severe ice and lead in the ships' drinking water are just two of the alternative explanations. The disaster horrified Victorian society, sparking scepticism about the safety of tinned food that lingered for decades.

Canning on an industrial scale was perfected on the other side of the Atlantic and, by the 1880s, "England became awash with tinned Pacific salmon, corned beef, sardines, green beans, peas and heaven knows what else besides," wrote Clarissa Dickson-Wright in *A History of English Food*.

During World War II, tinned food became a vital tool in the government's efforts to keep the population fed. An air-raid precautions booklet from The Canned Foods Advisory Bureau sought to persuade sceptics: "Canning is the most successful

method yet discovered of keeping food in perfect condition for long periods," it asserted. Spam (see page 46) meanwhile, which arrived from the US in 1941, helped save our bacon when fresh meat was rarely available.

In post-war Britain, householders happily filled their cupboards with cans. "After the war, families were delighted to have tinned peaches and tinned cream for Sunday lunch, and not even the most self-regarding of chefs seemed to mind using tinned tomatoes as a key ingredient in newly fashionable Italian and French peasant cuisine," wrote Pen Vogler in *Scoff: A History of Food and Class in Britain*.

The 1960s and 70s heralded another golden age; 'canoisseurs' could feast on an increasingly eclectic selection. There were soups of every conceivable style, cake-ready pineapple rings, blushing-pink ham, treacle sponge drenched in golden syrup, Alphabetti spaghetti... all of them increasingly smartly packaged in eye-catching tins. Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* of 1962 perfectly reflected the era's 'can-do' mood as well as the rise of consumer culture.

The allure of tinned food endures. Perhaps unsurprisingly, sales soared during the (ongoing) cost-of-living crisis, while 'luxury' tinned provisions have also become a trend. Beautifully designed, high-quality (and pricey) tins of anchovies, sardines and mackerel figure highly on many food lovers' 'most coveted' list.

It's not an exaggeration to say tinned food has revolutionised the way we eat. It has fuelled the expansion of empires, transformed diets around the world and changed what we grow and where we farm. For better or worse, its invention sundered us forever from the necessity of eating with the seasons. Every time you open your baked beans or a fancy tin of sardines, you're playing a minor part in a remarkable food history that links you to inventors, sailors, soldiers, explorers and artists. Now pass that can opener.

THE HISTORY OF THE CAN OPENER

FACT: the invention of food sealed in metal cans preceded the can opener by almost five decades. The first tin-opening tool was patented in the UK in 1855 by surgical instrument-maker Robert Yeates. Three years later, Connecticut resident Ezra Warner patented his version in the US. The crank-wheel opener we cherish today only came about in the 1920s.

Before these inventions, employing a hammer, chisel and brute force was the recommended method – although military personnel who relied on tinned food may have been tempted to use bayonets and other weaponry.



1962 Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans*, featuring 32 varieties of the company's soup, caused a sensation in the art world.

1970 The Monty Python 'Spam' sketch was televised. The word Spam is uttered at least 132 times.

1978 The first 'spam' email was sent. The Monty Python sketch gave rise to the concept of using the word for unwanted, unsolicited communications.



2008 Barack Obama invoked the power of the tin with his 'Yes We Can!' presidential campaign slogan, and is duly elected. [NB: Tins may not have swayed the vote.]

2020 COVID-19 lockdowns caused the British public

to re-embrace its love of tinned food; sales increased by 72% on the previous year.



2024 The global market has reached a value of about US\$99.3 billion. Chopped tomatoes and baked beans are

among Waitrose's biggest hitters – both saw double-digit sales growth between 2022 and 2023.

Miso & sesame salmon fishcakes

These umami-rich patties are super-speedy and easy to assemble, using tinned fish and a sesame-seed coating rather than the usual breadcrumbs. For a purse-friendly option, use Essential Wild Pink Salmon and remove the larger bones.

Serves 2

Prepare 25 minutes + standing

Cook 15 minutes

- 20g ginger, peeled and grated
- 1 tbsp white miso paste
- 1 unwaxed lime, zest, juice of ½, ½ in wedges
- 1 egg
- 160ml can coconut cream
- 30g panko breadcrumbs
- 2 x 170g cans skinless and boneless wild red salmon, drained
- 4 salad onions, finely sliced
- 2 tbsp black or white sesame seeds (or a mixture)
- 120g jasmine rice, rinsed
- 3 tbsp sesame or vegetable oil
- 235g pack green pak choi, quartered lengthways

1 Put the ginger, miso, lime juice and egg in a large mixing bowl and beat with a balloon whisk until smooth. Tip the coconut cream into a measuring jug and whisk with a fork until fairly smooth, then add 2 tbsp to the egg mixture. Add the panko breadcrumbs, salmon and salad onions to the egg mixture and stir until combined.

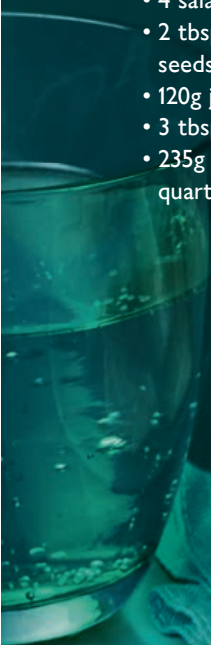
2 Scatter the sesame seeds onto a plate. Using your hands, divide the salmon mixture into 4, then compress and shape into patties (each about 7cm diameter). Press into the sesame seeds, turning to coat both sides; set aside (cover and chill up to 12 hours ahead, if liked).

3 Top up the jug of coconut cream with water until you have 240ml in total. Put the rice in a medium saucepan and pour over the diluted coconut cream with a pinch of salt. Bring to the boil, then reduce the heat to low, cover and cook undisturbed for 10-12 minutes until the coconut mixture has been absorbed by the

rice. Remove from the heat and let stand for 8-10 minutes before fluffing up with a fork and stirring through the lime zest.

4 While the rice is cooking, heat 2 tbsp oil in a large nonstick frying pan and fry the fishcakes over a medium heat for 3-5 minutes on each side until golden brown and piping hot all the way through. Transfer to a warm plate and set aside. Wipe out the frying pan, then heat the remaining 1 tbsp oil and add the pak choi quarters, cut-side down. Cook for 2-3 minutes, then turn, add 1 tbsp water and cook for a further 2 minutes until wilted and tender; season. Divide the rice between 2 plates and serve with the fishcakes, pak choi and lime wedges for squeezing over.

Per serving 3909kJ/936kcal/52g fat/21g saturated fat/65g carbs/5.1g sugars/6.3g fibre/47g sugars/2.5g salt »





IN PRAISE OF BAKED BEANS

Is there a household in the UK whose storecupboard is not graced by a can or two of baked beans in tomato sauce? They're incredibly popular (nearly two-thirds of UK households say they can't live without them), but their origin lies on the other side of the Atlantic, in colonial New England. Puritan families around Massachusetts often slow-cooked haricot beans with pork, sweetened them with maple syrup and had them as a sabbath meal (and their roots most likely lie in Native American cuisine). To this day, Boston is known as 'bean town'.

These three mini-makeovers raise beans from everyday to extra-special (although, let's not knock the classic cheesy beans on toast – possibly with added Marmite).

MASALA BEANS

Fry a chopped onion in a drizzle of oil until softened. Stir in some crushed garlic, a pinch of dried chilli flakes and a little ground cumin and garam masala, then fry until fragrant. Stir in baked beans and simmer until hot. Scatter over Cooks' Ingredients Crispy Fried Onions and serve either with toasted naan or a jacket potato.

TORTILLA BEANS

Fry a chopped red onion in oil until softened, then add Cooks' Ingredients Mexican Style Seasoning, stir and

cook for 2 minutes. Stir in baked beans and simmer until hot. Pile into bowls and top with a dollop of guacamole, crumbled feta and coriander leaves. Serve with tortilla chips for dunking.

BRUNCH BEANS

Fry bacon lardons until crisp, then set aside on a plate. Cook sliced chestnut mushrooms in the bacon fat for a few minutes, then return the crispy bacon to the pan and stir in baked beans. Simmer until hot, pile onto toasted sourdough and top with a fried egg. »

Jackfruit stew with spices & orange

Cooked jackfruit has a similar texture to pulled pork and it absorbs flavours brilliantly. Here we've taken a Moroccan-inspired route with ras el hanout, harissa and orange to make a hearty vegan one-pot.

Serves 4

Prepare 15 minutes

Cook 40 minutes

- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 1 large red onion, finely chopped
- 2 x 410g cans PlantLiving: Jackfruit Pieces in Water, drained
- 3 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1½ tbsp Cooks' Ingredients Ras El Hanout
- 1½-2 tbsp rose harissa
- 400g can chopped tomatoes
- 400g can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 400ml vegetable stock
- 200g couscous
- 1 tbsp freshly squeezed orange juice (about ½ orange)
- 2 tsp pomegranate molasses
- Pinch of sugar (optional)

TO SERVE

- 4 tbsp Greek-style dairy-free yogurt alternative
- 50g pomegranate seeds
- ¼ x 25g pack coriander, leaves roughly chopped, plus a few sprigs

1 Heat the oil in a large sauté pan or casserole dish over a medium heat, then cook the onion with a pinch of salt for 6-8 minutes until softened. Meanwhile, put the drained jackfruit in the centre of a clean tea towel, bring together the corners, then wring out the excess liquid over the sink (this helps to achieve a meaty texture). Reduce the heat to medium-low, add the garlic and ras el hanout to the onion and stir fry for 1-2 minutes. Tip in the jackfruit and harissa and stir fry for 2 minutes until the jackfruit is nicely coated.

2 Stir in the chopped tomatoes, chickpeas and stock. Bring to the boil, then reduce the heat to low and gently simmer, uncovered, for 20-25 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the sauce has thickened slightly and everything is piping hot throughout. Meanwhile, cook the couscous according to pack instructions.

3 When the stew is ready, use two forks to shred the jackfruit chunks. Stir in the orange juice and pomegranate molasses; season. Add a pinch of sugar to balance the spices, if liked. Divide the couscous among 4 shallow bowls; spoon over the stew. Add a dollop of yogurt alternative to each serving, then scatter with the pomegranate seeds and coriander sprigs.



LOW IN SATURATED FAT

✓ **Per serving** 2253kJ/535kcal/10g fat/1.6g saturated fat/85g carbs/24g sugars/14g fibre/15g protein/1.5g salt/vegan/2 of your 5 a day

COOK'S TIP

A versatile tin for the storecupboard, jackfruit is an excellent alternative to shredded meat. Try cooking it with fajita-style spices and piling into tacos or use in place of beef mince in a plant-based bolognese or chilli.



TIN DOS & DON'TS

*Waitrose Partner & technical manager
Jonathon Bayne busts
canned-food myths.*

Q Is it safe to eat the contents of a dented tin? It's always wise to ensure the can is intact, as any damage to the seal could allow microorganisms in the air to spoil the contents, or worse, make you ill.

Q Can I keep an opened tin in the fridge? No. Always decant the contents into an airtight container before storing in the fridge. Foods that are low in acid interact with air, which can lead to the metal in the can transferring to the food.

Q What's the best way to store cans? Unopened cans should be kept in a cool, dry place. After opening, decant the contents into an airtight container, store in the fridge and consume within 48 hours.



Q Why is it OK to keep golden syrup in its can once opened?

Certain containers are manufactured differently and the high sugar content in golden syrup makes it safe to store it in its can at room temperature. Always replace the lid securely.

Q Is tinned food good for us?

Generally, tinned fruit and veg is as nutritious as fresh; 80g is 1 of your 5 a day. Avoid added sugar or salt. »



LOVELY SPAM! WONDERFUL SPAM!

Spam was unleashed on the world by Minnesota-based producer Hormel on 5 July 1937. Its name is thought to be an acronym of either 'shoulder of pork and ham', 'spiced ham' or 'Specially Processed American Meat'. Arriving in the UK in 1941, it quickly became an inescapable part of the wartime diet and was later immortalised in Monty Python's 1970 'Spam' television sketch.

Not content with conquering the US and the UK, Spam's reach has spread around the world. Introduced to the Pacific islands following US military action in the region, it was adopted into local diets. Korea's much loved budae-jjigae, 'army base stew', is made up of Spam, hot dogs, baked beans and kimchi. In Hawaii, musubi is a type of nigiri sushi made with a slice of Spam topping the rice. In the Philippines, Spam tocino, flavoured with sugar, soy sauce and pineapple juice, remains a much-loved breakfast dish.

And what is it exactly? The original Spam is just pork, salt, water, sugar, potato starch and sodium nitrite.

FIVE THINGS YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT SPAM

1 Monty Python's *Spam Song* was a parody of *The Viking Song* by British-Sierra Leonean classical composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (hence the Vikings in the sketch).

2 Hawaiians consume about five cans per person each year, making the state the largest US market for Spam.

3 People in the US territory of Guam eat the most Spam per capita, estimated at 16 cans per person each year. South Korea is the second-largest world consumer.

4 During Lunar New Year, gift boxes containing tins of Spam, seasonings and condiments are popular presents in South Korea.

5 In addition to Classic and Lite (both available at Waitrose), there are numerous other flavours: Black Pepper, Maple, Teriyaki, Turkey....



JEREMY LEE
*Chef/proprietor,
 Quo Vadis, London*

"Tinned sardines and anchovies are a vital staple – a boon to the cook who is devilled for time and much in need of swift deliciousness."



SABRINA GHAYOUR
*Chef and author
 of Flavours*

"Being Persian, it's all about pulses. I have kidney beans, chickpeas, black-eyed beans, cannellini and butter beans at any one time. We use pulses in so many recipes, from salads to hot soups, stews and so much more."

CAN-DO ATTITUDE

Top chefs and food writers share
 the tins they couldn't live without



DINA BEGUM
Author of Made in Bangladesh

"I have tinned tuna handy for making a quick Niçoise salad or spicy tuna boras (Bangladeshi fritters) with potatoes and lots of thinly sliced onions and coriander."



TOM KERRIDGE
Chef and TV presenter

"Chopped tinned tomatoes can go into bolognese, stews... anything. Quick and easy to use, they just need a little cooking to get rid of the acidity."



PAUL AINSWORTH
Chef and restaurateur

"We always have a tin of Carnation milk in the cupboard for when my wife Emma's nan visits. There's nothing she loves more than crumble with Carnation on top."



JOSÉ PIZARRO
Chef and restaurateur

"Tinned sardines are a secret hobby of mine! I collect tin after tin of them. They're incredible in an omelette, or mixed with a bit of yogurt and herbs on toast for a quick lunch."



ASMA KHAN
*Restaurateur and
 cookbook author*

"I use tinned tomato purée to thicken keema mattar (spiced minced meat with peas). It's great for the gravy base of almost any dish and adds a lovely tang." »

PORTRAITS: ALEXANDER BAXTER,
 ANDREW CALLAGHAN; KRIS KIRKHAM