



THE PACKER

The big wave is the microwave

By Jim Offner
Special to The Packer

Next to the knife, the microwave has probably done more to revolutionize the fresh-cut produce business than any other implement, according to sales agents.

The Sholl Group II, marketer of the Green Giant Fresh brand, is an example. The Eden Prairie, Minn.-based company, which has a network of processing facilities across the U.S., now offers a line of microwaveable vegetables called Freshables SteamPerfect. The product comes in a steamer bag that features a nozzle that releases steam once the contents are microwaved.

"It was something consumers have been looking for," said Jason Landry, the Yarmouth, Maine-based sales director for the Sholl Group II. "The retailers have been looking for something innovative."

The company worked with a number of ideas, including stir-fry vegetables accompanied by a sauce pouch, Landry said.

Then, it developed Freshables and launched it officially about a year ago.

"The key item is the Freshables, steamed, flavor packet in the bag," Landry said. "It steams in the bag in microwave in two to three minutes. It's ready to serve once it's done."

Convenience, a fundamental principle of

fresh-cut produce, is enhanced with the new line of items, Landry said.

"Once it's cooked, it's ready to serve," he said. "So there's nothing else that has to be opened up, unlike others where you have to open the pouch and pour it on separately."

The ubiquitous nature of microwave ovens made this type of product inevitable, Landry said.

"Without a doubt, it's been crucial," he said. "And with this new steam technology it has retained more nutritional value."

The utilitarian aspects of microwaveable fresh-cut items have not escaped others.

Southern Specialties Inc., a Pompano Beach, Fla.-based shipper, offers numerous microwaveable items under its Southern Selects brand.

"We're having excellent success with our value-added Southern Selects French bean program," said Charlie Eagle, vice president of business development. "The beans are available in 8-ounce microwaveable trays, as well as 8-ounce microwaveable bags that are a perfect accompaniment to our 8-ounce microwaveable snow peas and sugar snaps."

The company also offers a 2-pound club pack.

"We found that there's also good demand



The Sholl Group II offers the Freshables SteamPerfect line of microwaveable vegetables.

for our 1-pound retail microwaveable bag," Eagle said. "They've been on the mark."

All thanks to the microwave, Eagle said.

"We've had varying amounts of microwaveable products on the market for probably two years now," he said. "We start-

ed with microwaveable trays, and then we got into some microwaveable different bags. So they've been on the market for awhile."

All in the name of convenience, he added.

"The microwave is a great asset for us," he said. "Everything that you hear about today's homemaker not having time apparently is true. The microwave is a fantastic tool that everybody is comfortable with at this point. We're not going to see it go away. We're going to see more and more microwaveable products."

Supreme Cuts LLC, Mahwah, N.J., processes and ships fresh-cut products across the U.S. to a number of major retail clients, including A&P, King Kullen and Meijer.

The company ships microwave-ready snow peas, sugar snaps, french beans, baby yellow patty pan, baby green patty pan, baby green zucchini and newly launched off-the-cob corn.

"I'd say it's becoming more standard," company president Merle Axelrod said of microwaveable fresh-cut products. "We've been doing that from the get-go, being able to microwave the product right in the bag. We also work at having some pretty cool recipes on our Web site as well as in the bag. The consumer knows all about what our product is and how to use it."