

Hormel Foods - Our Food Journey™ Podcast
Episode 11 - A Visit to Hawaii's SPAM JAM®

Ethan Watters: Welcome to Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel foods. In this episode we're going to try something different. We're going to take you on a journey, a quest. We want to explore a single question that we've been curious about.

What is it about SPAM® and Hawaii? SPAM® products are big all over the world, the product was rolled out in 1937, over eight billion cans have been sold in forty-four countries. Every three seconds cans of SPAM® are eaten around the world, so in the time I'm talking, twenty cans of SPAM® have been opened somewhere. But Hawaii and the Pacific islands are special. If you've ever travelled to the islands you'll probably notice that SPAM® is everywhere. It's at gas stations, fast food joints, high end restaurants. It's not only a beloved product, but one that's been woven into the culture in a unique way. As far as meat protein goes, SPAM® has no equal on the island. So we decided to send our staff member Claire Stremple to dig in. She's with me here today. Hello Claire.

Claire Stremple: Hi Ethan.

Ethan: So first I want to deeply apologize for what a difficult assignment we sent you on. It must have been tough to fly to Hawaii for this. Did you know about SPAM® and Hawaii before this trip?

Claire: Yeah, so when I was a kid we went on a family trip to Hawaii. So I've been a fan of gas station SPAM® sushi since a tender young age.

Ethan: So tell me about this trip.

Claire: Well, if you want to get to the heart of what SPAM® means to Hawaiians, a good time to go visit the islands is in April. You've got to go to Oahu, because that's where the annual SPAM® festival takes place. It's called SPAM JAM®.

Ethan: Okay, SPAM JAM®. For those of us who haven't gone, tell us more about that.

Claire: Let me let Laura Kay Rand tell you. She's the vice president at the Hawaii Food Bank. I met her downtown on my first day in Waikiki.

Laura Kay Rand: SPAM JAM® is a massive Waikiki block party. Forty thousand of your closest friends converge on Waikiki, and not only are they able to

enjoy delicious food, but they're also becoming aware of people who don't have that opportunity, and who depend on Hawaii Food Bank and our network of charitable agencies to be able to get the food that they need.

Ethan: So SPAM JAM® sounds like an excellent promotional thing. How did Hormel Foods come up with this idea?

Claire: They didn't. One of the remarkable things about SPAM JAM® is that it isn't a marketing promotion. Hawaiians just really love SPAM®. A lot of people I talk to think it was invented there. We'll hear more from Laura later, but first let's check out SPAM JAM®.

Let me set the scene. The air is warm and humid and the streets are lined with tents selling every imaginable SPAM® preparation. That's where I meet Barbara Campbell, who dreamed the whole thing up.

Barbara Campbell: I am Barbara Campbell, vice president of the Outrigger Hotels & Resorts. And I am the co-creator of the Waikiki SPAM JAM® Festival.

Claire: How did this come about?

Barbara: So sixteen years ago, we were cooking up SPAM® and eggs, which is a regular breakfast for those of use in Hawaii, and we were cooking it up for our housekeepers for housekeeping week, and we thought, oh my gosh, wouldn't this make a fun event or festival celebrating Hawaii's love of SPAM®? So it was born that year.

Claire: When I met her, Barbara was wearing a lei and SPAM® earrings. She was really excited because so many people came out to the event. Not just tourists, but tons of locals.

Barbara: You know, it's just... I literally... Here we call it chicken skin, like goose bumps, and after sixteen years to look out over a crowd of roughly thirty thousand people, to see all these booths and everybody's got a smile on their face... They just love the whimsical, kind of quirky aspects of SPAM JAM®, and just seeing everybody, families, both local residents and visitors all hanging out together, enjoying music and all the food, just having a great time.

Claire: So Hormel didn't dream this up, but now they're a big sponsor. It's for a good cause, too.

Barbara: A really important part of the event is giving back to the community. And since this event started, we've given over 250,000 dollars to the Hawaii Food Bank, which is helping to feed Hawaii's

hungry. And we've donated over 35,000 pounds of food to them. So that really is the icing on the cake, just to be able to give back to the community while having such a great time.

Claire: But SPAM JAM® isn't why SPAM® is popular in Hawaii. To understand that story, you need a little SPAM® history lesson. And who better to talk to than Brial Lillis, who is the brand manager for SPAM®?

Brian Lillis: It really goes back to the late 30s, when the president of the Hormel Foods Company at the time was really looking for a way to provide an affordable protein that could be preserved and used in a number of different areas. So he came up with this canned lunch meat product. The term SPAM® was coined at a party back in 1936, right around the holidays. The Gentleman that came up with the name won \$100, I believe, for coining the phrase and coming up with it.

Ethan: Wait, so that's a true story?

Claire: Yep, that's a true story. The winner was an actor named Kenneth Dagno. He won a hundred bucks for coming up with the name. Big money for the 30s.

Brian: The name stuck, and then from there, once the war started and continued, then it became a protein that could help support the troops all around the world. There are countless documents talking about sending it over to these Asia-Pacific regions, even European regions as well. Hawaii is a great example, as a large number of those G.I.s were coming back from the Asia teater, Asia-Pacific theater, coming through Hawaii, making stops there and interacting with the locals who were there and having this product available.

Ethan: Ok, so SPAM® was popular during the war when it was being imported by the military, but how did it grow to be a staple food for Hawaiian cuisine? I think you said forty thousand people come out to this event?

Claire: Well that brings us to another character I met at SPAM JAM®. Scott Gamble is the distributor for SPAM® in Hawaii. So when you start an audio interview, you usually ask the person what you had for breakfast, to check their levels and make sure that you're recording. This is how the interview with Scott started.

...if you could tell me what you had for breakfast this morning?

Scott Gamble: I had SPAM®, eggs, and rice.

Claire: Stop.

Scott: I'm serious.

Claire: So Scott Gamble inherited the company from his father, who inherited it from his father.

Scott: His name was Lester Gamble, and he was in the navy, and that brought him off to Hawaii. He met my grandmother, who was born and raised here, and he decided to stay. He started the business in 1950. Hormel was our first partner, first customer. He actually flew, in 1950, to LA and then caught a train to Minnesota to knock on the door at Hormel to ask if he could be the broker for Hawaii, and they didn't have anybody else, so they said yes and it's been an amazing partnership since then.

Claire: Well played, Lester.

Ethan: So interesting, this one family is kind of behind this cultural phenomenon.

Claire: Yeah, they saw the positive impact SPAM® was having on the community, and they wanted to keep a good thing going.

Scott: You see it every day, generations passing it onto the next generation. It's a comfort food here in Hawaii, but it's something that I think people from Hawaii take ownership of. They feel like SPAM® is their brand and they're proud of it. So Hawaii people generally like to share, and they share that love wherever they go.

Claire: Sharing is part of island culture. It's not always easy to live on a tiny speck of rock, thousands of miles from the mainland. So people look out for each other. Remember how SPAM JAM® is for a good cause? And the beneficiary of that cause is Hawaii Food Bank? Let's take it back to Laura.

Laura: SPAM® is as popular and as critical to Hawaii cuisine as bacon. You can go into any restaurant and any place else you would order bacon and eggs, and in Hawaii you order SPAM® and eggs. You can get SPAM® and eggs everywhere. It is very much a deep part of Hawaii culture, but not only for breakfast. In Hawaii, items like SPAM®, it is a staple. In other states that I've lived, it is not necessarily been an important staple and an important ingredient of a diet, but in Hawaii SPAM® is the number one. We have every single imaginable kind, and sometimes on the grocery shelf it will be, from top to bottom, six different shelves of different kinds of SPAM®, and everybody has their favorite.

We love that we're able to provide that variety, and we're able to provide it because of the generosity of the community. Because of amazing events like SPAM JAM®, where SPAM®, Hawaii's number one meat, was also mixed with all of these community donations that people brought in. So we walked away from that event, not only with three pallets of SPAM®, but also with hundreds of pounds of food that we are then able to distribute to Hawaii's hungry.

I think that food really is the big equalizer. No matter where you live, no matter what culture you come from, no matter what your neighborhood looks like, there is a way that communities, families, friends, we all come together over food. It is how we celebrate, it is how we build relationships, it is how we meet people, you know, you meet someone and you're like, oh let's get together for coffee, let's get together for dinner. And even in times that are trying and struggling, relationships are growing and friendships are growing and some of the bonds that people make in the toughest times, we all know, become the bonds that last into adulthood, into years to come. And they've happened because people reached out during times that they were struggling, and then they're no longer struggling, they're able to reach out to the next person who is struggling. And you get stronger together.

Claire: So what I realized was how important SPAM® was for everyone on the island. All socioeconomic groups. Brian Hirschenberg is a pastor who works with Laura and the Hawaii Food Bank to distribute canned food. He's experienced first hand the power of serving cultural comfort foods, like SPAM®. I met Hirschenberg at the Hawaii Food Bank warehouse, where he was picking up cans to distribute in one of the poorer neighborhoods of Hawaii.

Brian Hirschenberg: You walk in through Hawaii Food Bank's door and there are crates and pallets of different types of food, and you're walking left and right and you're always thinking to yourself, now what do my people want and need? How can I best help their nutrition? There's a balance between nutrition and what people like to eat, what they love to eat. And you walk, and then you try to strike that balance when you're putting together bags and boxes of food, not only for adults, seniors, but their children as well. So you kind of balance it out when you're walking into the place.

Claire: Well SPAM® is nice because you get something they love to eat and something they need to eat.

Brian: Absolutely. I can't wait to see now how much SPAM® I can get today.

Claire: So when you're experiencing hunger, or receiving aid, you should still be able to enjoy the foods you live. Food fuels the body, but its also a signifier of home and community.

Brian: So I'm from Texas, but once we got here and realized, oh my gosh, SPAM® is integrated into everything. It's so ingrained in the culture here in Hawaii and their taste buds, they want more of it. All you have to do is open a menu in any restaurant and see all the SPAM® offerings. Everything from SPAM® linguini, to SPAM® and breakfast items. They get very creative with it, which is what I love. It's just a really important cornerstone part of the Hawaiian diet. The Pacific-Asian diet is the same way. They've grabbed onto that, and so SPAM® equals Hawaii these days.

Our volunteers put the food in boxes and bags and we distribute it to the people, and we're on the front line of things so we get to see the smiles and the tears of joy. When it comes to canned meats, I'm sure you've heard this before, but they are like gold here in Hawaii. It's absolute gold for them because, at

the bare minimum, the protein in the canned meats keeps these people going as many times as their lifeblood, and it stores well, of course. So whether they're in houses, a community on the beach somewhere, tents, or in low-income housing, they can rely on those canned meats to get their energy and keep going, sustain themselves. **SPAM® is a big part of what we do, and being able to distribute those canned meats along with all our other foods is a real blessing to the people who we serve.**

I read somewhere that when you factor in the cost of rent here in Hawaii, we become the sixth highest poverty state in the United States. People don't realize that. People from the mainland see Hawaii as a playground for the rich and all that, until they come here and really get down into the communities they don't see... Because of those high rents and because of a lot of fixed incomes, there's nothing left to buy groceries. So the Hawaii food bank meets that need, and any of their partners like Hormel, and all the other providers of the food, if they only knew on the front line what all these food needs mean to these people...

Claire: What kind of food do people crave the most when you arrive? Are there requests?

Brian: You must be at some of our events. The request is SPAM®. **How much more SPAM® can you bring us? I keep on telling them, if it's there at the Hawaii Food Bank, we're going to grab it for you. They're so thankful. We pull out those cans of SPAM® and it made their day. They're excited.**

Claire: Food becomes part of a culture, and that means more than just filling people up. It's about how a community identifies itself, how it expresses social cohesion. **How people use SPAM® in Hawaii is all about how they manifest themselves as good neighbors and as people. And Hawaii, I have to say, has also pioneered the most delicious ways to use SPAM®.**

Ethan: Thank you for joining us on this episode of Our Food Journey™, a podcast by Hormel Foods. For more information about Hormel and its engagement with its partners and customers, you can visit hormelfoods.com. Until next time.