

Paste

Are Lunchables

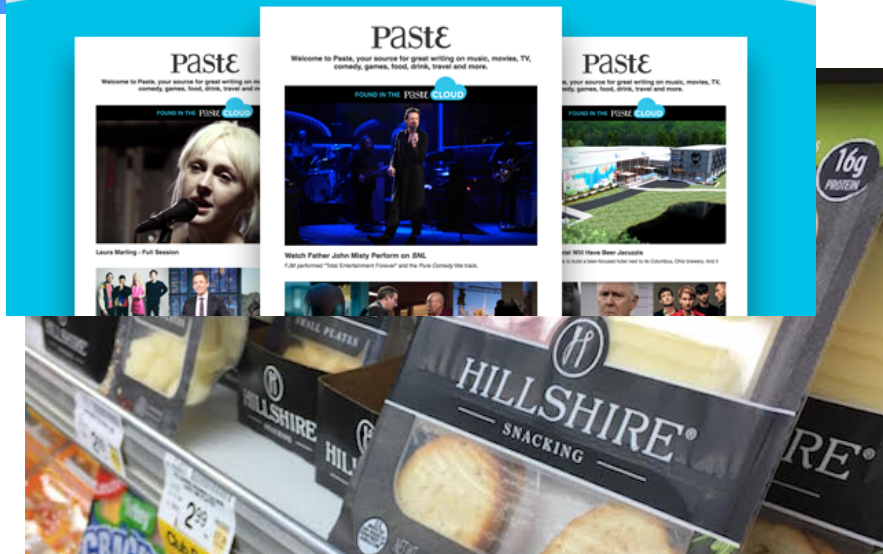
By Rose Lambert-Sluder | J
Photo by Rose Lambert-Sluder

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Remember Lunchables?

Of course you do. Other kids eyed your table, the days you had one. The boxed food was decadent but uncomplicated. You rationed out ham disks based on cracker count; possibly Lunchables taught you thrift and the art of savoring. Pieces were as bright and hands-on as LEGOs. The nacho cheese was, probably, part melted LEGO.

And they were mad gross.

Single-serve packaging was native to my childhood. Snack Pack puddings were all over, as were cups of mandarin oranges floating in sugar, and those crackers you slathered in a [viscous orange](#) material. We learned to see these things as food. We learned to peel cheese slices apart like glued paper and to throw out handfuls of plastic after lunch. Plastic and food were connected, food resembling plastic and plastic delivering food.

But as an adult? I expected adult eating to be more, well, adultlike.

Maybe not.

I'm in the condiment aisle looking for capers. A sophisticated choice, good for dumping onto chicken.

And on the shelf, beside the pickles, I see a bright package of something called Olives to Go! [sic] A four-pack resembling applesauce cups, but instead of applesauce the cups hold black olives. Sliced black olives. Italian Herb black olives. Taco (?) black olives.

Olives to Go! So, are we expected to eat olives on the run? I mean, say I just caught the train to work and think, shoot, I skipped breakfast and my day is slammed. But wait—I've got an Olives to Go! cup in my purse. Beautiful. I peel back the foil. I chew on the watery slices and lean back, pleased. These 40 calories will fortify me. Damn, I'm a modern woman. If they could see me now.

But yeah, no. I'm not trying to eat solo black olives—well, ever, but especially in public. That seems better done at home, alone, desperate, maybe when the fridge is bare and you're spooning cold canned goods into your mouth.

I'm still in the supermarket, having forsaken capers (too expensive). What other bizarre takes on portable packaging are there?

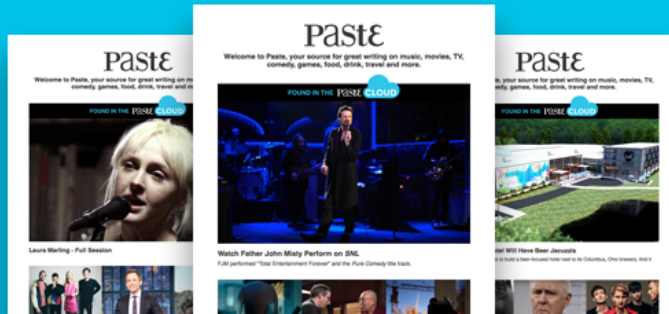
Quite a lot.

Prunes wrapped [individually](#) like candy, yet nothing like candy. A gloomy trio of boiled egg, peanuts and cubed cheese ([Ready Egg Go!](#)). The same assortment, but with chunks of wet turkey instead of eggs ([P3 Portable Protein Packs](#)). [Tuna Creations](#) pouches, oh so similar to cat food, and

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Of course, the ingredients t
type” flavor.

avor, grill flavor *and* “chardonnay

Now, I can get behind some

n dip.

But this stuff—this stuff ma
pockets and has the right a

ea that food comes in sterile plastic

“Hospital food and airplan
it’s as if “people don’t know how to mix things, eat what with what, and manage their portions. I don’t want things to be precut and predicted, because I like things fresh.”

those are not good things.” For him,

Since preference formation begins when we’re tiny, some denied of such foods as kids later feel like they dodged a bullet. “I was jealous of the kids who brought Lunchables or Snack Packs to school,” says Ezra, 34, “but now I see it as one of the million little things my parents did that was formative for my personality.”

Most of us in the U.S., though, dodged no such thing. “Lunchables launched in the late 1980s, so the Millennial generation grew up with the packaging format,” says Kate Bertrand Connolly, a journalist who frequently covers [consumer-goods packaging](#). “For them, a single-serving packaged snack...feels familiar or even routine.”

“It reminds me of aseptic single-serving packaging—think juice boxes—becoming an accepted format for products like mocktails and wine,” Connolly tells me. And nothing says maturity like juice box-inspired wine.

Then again, Lunchables. The golden Lunchable and its perfect geometry. Its gem-like Crunch Bar. Ask a youngish adult about Lunchables, and she’ll give the wistful smile of a seasoned lover.

They *were* pretty dope. After all, we’re tactile; we love assembling things. Brooks, 33, reminisces that, “You got to create your own meal—the pepperoni, the shredded cheese, the cracker. Like a low-end version of a Parisian picnic.” To kids, ownership over food empowers.

Consistency is mighty comforting, too. “The pizza bread reminded me of what I like most about the Eucharist: flavorless and crisp and each one is the same,” says Claire, 26.

Then, that specialness. “Every Friday people would gather around me,” says Jess, 28. “The Lunchable branding attracted other peers to your lunch and/or made them want to sit by you. And I never gave away any piece of them.” Simply having a Lunchable upped her social capital.

Wouldn’t that dopeness—or parts of it—extend to adult eating experiences, too? It’s true, much about Lunchables still holds appeal. Single portions limit decision-making and impulse control, leaving mental space for other tasks. They’re convenient and, if not economically rational, at least manageable. When you can buy a 300-calorie charcuterie board for \$2.99, why mess with unwieldy rods of salami? And why make your own charcuterie board when, according to [The Hartman Group](#), nearly half of our eating occasions are solo? Marketers insist that mini-meals and portable snacks jibe with our rhythms—and they have a point.

Even the local food movement has pounced on Lunchable nostalgia. Take the [Locable](#), a grab-and-go box of summer sausage, cheese curds, and craft mustard, curated by a butcher in Asheville, NC. Food blogs, too, abound with [homemade Lunchable](#) ideas. Companies like [Graze](#) merge snack boxes with our interest in wellness.

Naturally, I tried a Lunchable and a Small Plate side by side. Naked of packaging, the foods look a lot alike. The Lunchable made me feel I should be feeding my Tamagotchi; the Small Plate made me feel I should be mingling at an art gala. Both were disorienting, over-salted, and—it’s true—tasty.

I was in my kitchen at the time, standing at the counter, alone.