

Spam Museum slices up kitsch, history in Minn.

By Cliff Terry
Photos by Pat Terry



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Special to The Denver Post

AUSTIN, Minn. — When you think of subjects that a museum ought not to feature, lima beans may come to mind. Or dental floss.

How about Spam? Yes, there is such a place here, headquarters of Hormel Foods, which produces the canned luncheon meat, an American icon of sorts that one either loves or finds totally disgusting.

Made from a blend of leg and shoulder ham, with seasoning added, the product in the distinctive blue-and-yellow can, of course, has had a prominent, if somewhat narrowly focused, place in modern American history, from being a staple for World War II GIs to its contemporary status as a punch line for late-night talk show hosts.

On his Christmas Eve radio broadcast from London in 1942, Edward R. Murrow noted, "the Beef-eaters are now Spambassadors." More recently, David Letterman talked up Spam on a Rope — "for people who like to eat in the shower."

Opened in September 2001, the 16,500-square-foot facility manages to combine its relentless commercial promotion with a hefty amount of entertainment.

"The whole museum, really, is based on a sense of humor," said one typically friendly guide, known as a Spambassador. "So many companies just wouldn't do this — put in some negative things."

In one attraction — a video of the famous 1970 Monty Python sketch, "Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam ..." — a bunch of Vikings (for some reason) sing the joys of the meat while dining in the Green Midget Cafe. One character indignantly complains, "I hate Spam."

Un-Spambitious origins
Located in Austin, about 90 miles south of the Twin Cities and the Mall of America, the museum is 20 times larger than a Spam "history center" established in 1991 in a mall. It was intended to be temporary but quickly became a hit.

Since the opening, almost 80,000 visitors have come from every

If you go

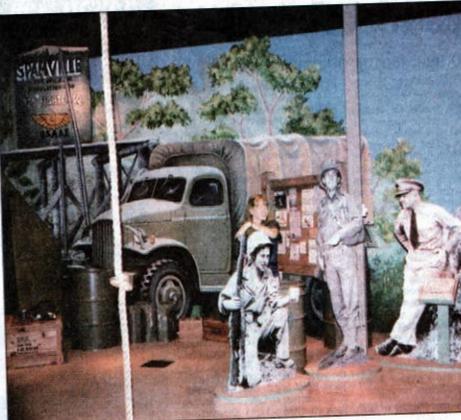
The Spam Museum in Austin, Minn., is about 90 miles south of Minneapolis. From Minneapolis, take Interstate 35 south to Interstate 90, then go east for 7 miles to East 1782, the Sixth Street NE exit. Drive south and go right at the Hormel Foods Plant. Veer to the right at the split in the road. Follow the curve, go straight, and you've arrived. The Spam Museum can also be reached from Rochester, home of the Mayo Clinic, by taking Interstate 90 west for about 40 miles.

Hours: After Labor Day through April 30, the museum is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, and from noon to 4 p.m. Sunday. It's closed Monday. From May 1 through Labor Day, museum hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and noon to 4 p.m. Sunday.

Admission: Free
Information: Spam Museum, 1937 SPAM Blvd. (1101 Main Street North), Austin, MN 55912; 800-LUV-SPAM, 507-437-5100; or www.spam.com.

state and 43 countries. On a summer weekday afternoon, the parking lot was packed. Inside, the guest book contained signatures of pig pilgrims from places such as Louisiana, California, Virginia, New York state and Germany. (Trivia alert: The top Spam-consuming state is Hawaii. "Our 50th state, but first in Spam.") In fact, McDonald's is testing a Spam Breakfast Platter in Hawaii, where 3,000 were ordered the first day they appeared this June.

Other Spam-heavy states are Texas and Alaska, while the top cities are Honolulu, Little Rock, Ark.; Memphis, Tenn.; Birmingham, Ala.; and Charlotte, N.C. "It's especially very big in Korea and Guam," one Spambassador said, reinforcing the information put out by Hormel that Guam residents devour the most Spam per capita and that South Koreans consider it a "delicacy."



Special to The Denver Post: Pat Terry
At left, a World War II exhibit at the Spam Museum in Austin, Minn., includes a replica of a military camp, dubbed Spamville, where the meat was a staple for troops. Above, a Viking gleefully displays Spam in the museum's Green Midget Cafe.

Walking into a theater through doors shaped like pigs ("The architect went hog wild," our Spambassador quipped), you see a 12-minute film, "Spam ... A Love Story," in which a congressman from the Austin area serves up bits of you-know-what to his colleagues at a Washington breakfast, and a college student wears a T-shirt that reads, "I Think Therefore I Spam." There are old photos of a Japanese man who collects on a Japanese man who collects and hit with another late-night and a Jay Leno, pointing out that the product is sold in 99 percent of U.S. groceries. ("Just one guy holding out.")

A celebration of the meat

In the museum itself, there's the interactive "Spam Exam," a trivia quiz hosted by Al Franken, the one-time "Saturday Night Live" cast member and a native of close-by Albert Lea. (It's multiple choice.) Franken cracks, "so you won't have to think too hard." There's also a wall display featuring 3,298 cans of the stuff, along with a 5-foot replica of a Spamburger suspended in a corridor next to a 17-foot burger-dipping spatula. And, of course, there's a store offering a plethora of Spam merchandise such as boxer shorts, shot glasses, shower clogs, golf bags, pajamas, umbrellas, neckties, beach balls, table lamps, salt-and-pepper shakers and bowling shirts.

Spam trivia

- Originally called Hormel Spiced Ham, the product received its new name when an actor suggested it while attending a New Year's Eve party in 1938 thrown by Jay Hormel. He won \$100 for his idea.
- In 2002, Hormel Foods produced the 6 billionth can of Spam.
- It would take 2,051 cans to reach the top of the Washington Monument, more than 72 million to equal the weight of the Statue of Liberty, and 13,440 cans to span the Golden Gate Bridge.
- Spam is trademarked in more than 100 countries, and sold in more than 50, from Belize to Bulgaria. Surname to St. Kitts.
- It is sold on every continent except Antarctica, and produced in six plants in five countries: the U.S., Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and, surprisingly, Denmark — where, one supposes, the citizens happily munch on open-faced Spam sandwiches.

Along with the museum, Austin hosts the annual Spam Jam, held in July, which attracts visitors from as far as Ecuador, Thailand, Chile, Australia, New Zealand and, as if you didn't know, South Korea. This summer, the event was attended by NBC anchor Tom Brokaw and TV moms such as Barbara Billingsley ("Leave It to Beaver") and Marion Ross ("Happy Days"). During the fest, the ladies revealed their favorite Spam recipes: Cheesy Macaroni Bake (Ross) and Overnight Spam and Broccoli Cheese Strata (the Beaver's mom).

The event has included songs by the Spametees, whose repertoire includes "Mr. Spam Man" (sung to the tune of "Mr. Sand Man"); the Spam Town Belle (paddle-bout rides); and a Burma Shave-like

rhyming-sign contest ("She Would Always Be an Old Maid/She Would Never Catch a Man/Were They Lured One in With Spam?").

One Army Air Corps vet who fought in the Pacific told a reporter, "Some of those guys really, really liked Spam and some of them didn't. Personally, I thought it was pretty good at the time. We would be in the air for eight to 13 hours at a time, and Spam sandwiches got us through them."

Also on hand at Spam Jam were samples of Spamburger hamburgers handed out by operators of the Spam Mobile, described by a Hormel marketing manager as "basically a big Spam can on wheels"; and, selling quite briskly, Spam barbecue, Spam tacos, Spam

cheese curds, Spam corn dogs, Spam gyros, Spam egg rolls, and, yes, sweet and sour Spam.

At the museum, there are Spam marketing campaigns including radio commercials from the 1940s featuring famed comedians George Burns and Gracie Allen; vintage photos of Hormel Foods, including visiting dignitaries such as Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia; and interactive games, such as a simulated production line (complete with lab coat, mesh gloves, earplugs and a hairnet).

The World War II exhibit notes that Hormel provided 15 million cans of food to troops each week, with Spam feeding the starving British and Soviet armies as well as civilians. The display includes a replica of a military camp dubbed Spamville, contains letters from former Soviet Union premier Nikita Khrushchev ("Without Spam, we wouldn't have been able to feed our army").

And, to again show that to wit themselves, there's also a letter from President Dwight Eisenhower, the legendary wartime general, who in 1966 wrote Hormel: "I ate my share of Spam along with millions of other soldiers. It's the very best. I believe I can still forgive you your only sin: sending us so much of it."

Cliff Terry is a Chicago-based freelance writer and former staff writer for the Chicago Tribune.

SPAM, SPAM, SPAM, SPAM

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Made from a blend of leg and shoulder ham, with seasoning added, the product in the distinctive blue and yellow can, of course, has had a prominent, if somewhat narrowly-focused place in modern American history, from being a staple for World War II GIs to its contemporary status as a punch-line for late-night talk show hosts. On his Christmas Eve radio broadcast from London in 1942, Edward R. Murrow noted, “the Beefeaters are now Spameaters.” More recently, David Letterman talked up a fanciful item called Spam on a Rope—“for people who like to eat in the shower.”

Opened in September, 2001, the Spam Museum, a 16,500 square-foot facility, manages to combine its relentless commercial promotion with a hefty amount of entertainment. “The whole museum, really, is based on a sense of humor,” said one typically-friendly guide, officially known as a Spambassador. “So many companies just wouldn’t do this—put in some negative things.” In one popular attraction, for

instance—a video of the famous 1970 Monty Python sketch, “Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam.....”—a bunch of Vikings (for some reason) sing of the joys of the luncheon meat while dining in the Green Midget Cafe, but one character indignantly complains, “I HATE Spam.”

Located at 1937 Spam Blvd. in Austin—which is about 110 miles south of the Twin Cities and the Mall of America and 40 miles southwest of the Mayo Clinic and is officially known as Spamtown, USA—the museum is 20 times larger than a small Spam “history center” established in 1991 in a shopping mall that was intended to be temporary but quickly became a big hit.

Visitors have come from every state and over 40 countries. On a warm summer weekday afternoon, the parking lot was packed. Inside, the guest book contained signatures of recent pig pilgrims from places like Louisiana, California, Virginia, New York state and Germany. (Trivia alert: the top Spam-consuming state is Hawaii: “Our 50th state, but first in Spam”). Other Spam-heavy states are Texas and Alaska, while the top cities are Honolulu, Little Rock, Memphis, Birmingham and Charlotte, North Carolina. “It’s especially very big in Korea and Guam,” one Spambassador confided, reinforcing the information put out by Hormel that Guam citizens devour

the most Spam per capita and that South Koreans considered it a “delicacy.”

Walking into a theater through doors shaped like pigs (“The architect went hog wild,” our Spambassador quipped), check out a 12-minute film, “Spam... A Love Story,” in which a U.S. Congressman from the Austin area serves up bits of you-know-what to his colleagues at a Washington breakfast, and a college student wears a T-shirt that reads, “I Think Therefore I Spam.” There are old photos of the Hormel company, a segment on a Japanese man who collects haiku poems about Spam and a bit with another late-night host, Jay Leno, pointing out that the product is sold in 99% of U.S. groceries. (“Just one guy holding out.”)

Out in the museum itself, there’s the interactive “Spam Exam,” a trivia quiz hosted by Al Franken, the onetime “Saturday Night Live” cast member and, in fact, a native of close-by Albert Lea, Minnesota, (“It’s multiple choice,” Al cracks, “so you won’t have to think too hard.”) There’s also a wall display featuring 3,390 cans of the stuff, along with a five-foot replica of a Spamburger suspended in a corridor next to a 17-foot burger-flipping spatula. And, of course, there’s a retail store offering a plethora of Spam merchandise such as boxer shorts, shot glasses, shower clogs, golf bags, pajamas, umbrellas, neckties, beach balls, table lamps, salt and pepper shakers and bowling shirts.

Along with the museum, Austin is host to the annual Spam Jam, held in July, which attracts visitors from as far as Ecuador, Thailand, Chile, Australia, New Zealand and, as if you didn’t know, South Korea. The event has been attended by Tom Brokaw, the former NBC-TV anchor and author of “The Greatest Gen-



eration” that served in World War II, and television moms such as Barbara Billingsley (“Leave It to Beaver”) and Marion Ross (“Happy Days”). During the fest, the ladies revealed their favorite Spam recipes: Cheesy Macaroni Bake (Ross) and Overnight Spam and Broccoli Cheese Strata (the Beaver’s mom).

The event has included songs by that ever-popular singing group, the Spamettes, whose repertoire includes “Mr. Spam Man” (sung to the tune of “Mr. Sand Man”); the Spam Town Belle (paddleboat) rides; and a Burma Shave-like rhyming sign contest (“She Would Always Be an Old Maid/She Would Never Catch a Man/Were They Surprised at Eighty-Five/She Lured One in with Spam!”)

At a recent Spam Jam, one Army Air Corps vet who fought in the Pacific told a local reporter, “Some of those guys really, really liked Spam and some of them didn’t. Personally, I thought it was pretty good at the time. We would be in the air for eight to 13 hours at a time, and Spam sandwiches got us through them.”

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Spam Mobile, described by a Hormel marketing manager as “basically a big Spam can on wheels, and the coolest-looking thing since the (Oscar Mayer) Wiener Mobile”; and, selling quite briskly, Spam Barbecue, Spam Tacos, Spam Cheese Curds, Spam Corn Dogs, Spam Gyros, Spam Egg Rolls, and, yes, Sweet and Sour Spam. Down the line, there was also Spam Bingo.

Back at the museum, there are Spam marketing campaigns including radio commercials from the 1940s featuring famed comedians George Burns and Gracie Allen; vintage photos of Hormel Foods, including visiting dignitaries such as Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia; and interactive games, such as a simulated production line (complete with lab coat, mesh gloves, earplugs and hairnet).

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of a military camp dubbed “Spamville,” contains letters from former Soviet Union premier Nikita Khrushchev (“Without Spam, we wouldn’t have been able to feed our army”) and Britain’s onetime prime minister Margaret Thatcher, who remembered her teenage years. (“Of an English holiday during wartime, we had friends in, and I can quite vividly remember we opened a tin of Spam luncheon meat.”)

And, to again show that the Spam folks aren’t afraid to twit themselves, there’s also a letter from former president Dwight Eisenhower, the legendary war-time general, who in 1966 wrote Hormel: “I ate my share of Spam along with millions of other soldiers.” Ike then wryly added, “I believe I can still forgive you your only sin: sending us so much of it.”

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