



The pepperoni sandwich is part of the new First Strike Ration developed by the Combat Feeding Directorate at the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Systems Center in Natick, Mass.

MRE Production for 2014 Does Away With Lasagna, Refried Beans, and Fajitas

By Alex Dixon

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Barbecue shredded beef, vegetarian taco pasta and seasoned black beans will replace chicken fajitas, vegetable lasagna, refried beans and potato cheddar soup in the 2014 production of Meals, Ready-to-Eat.

Each year, the Combat Feeding Directorate at the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Systems Center at Natick, Mass., goes into the field to test new food items with the warfighters and get input on existing food items, said Jeanette Kennedy, a senior food technologist at Natick.

Soldiers also make recommendations for items they would like to see in Meals, Ready-to-Eat, known as MREs. But sometimes, implementing these items is not feasible due to the process of food preservation technology. Kennedy said this is the case with a commonly recommended item, pizza.

MREs are produced through the “retort process,” which is a thermal processing method meant to sterilize

food. The food items are sealed into a pouch and heated under pressure to temperatures above 240 degrees. This inactivates the microbes that would cause food spoilage.

Kennedy said Natick Soldier Research is currently researching non-thermal, low-thermal, and advanced thermal processes that are less detrimental to the food as compared to the retort process.

Entrees prepared using these methods will taste as though freshly prepared, Kennedy said.

“For example, the next generation of ration entrees may be processed via microwave sterilization, high pressure processing, super critical carbon dioxide preservation, or osmotic dehydration,” Kennedy said. “These novel food processing and preservation methods may enable us to produce a greater variety of highly desired menu items, for example eggs, macaroni and cheese and deli meats, that have a near-fresh quality and high

nutrient value.”

For next year’s production, Combat Feeding Directorate will also transition to foldable fiberboard sleeves instead of the current cartons inside the MREs to greatly reduce the size and weight, Kennedy said.

MREs have grown immensely in terms of variety of options and cuisines represented since the trench rations of World War I. Kennedy, along with Julie Smith, senior food technologist for the Combat Rations Team, said options will continue to grow.

Currently, there are 24 menus, which consist of an entrée, such as beef stew or lemon pepper tuna, and several other food items, such as crackers with cheese spread, fruit, and pound cake.

Since World War I’s trench rations, which consisted of large amounts of food such as canned bread, corned beef and sardines meant for the entire unit to consume, MREs

have grown smaller and more complex, while still retaining the nutrients required to sustain Soldier’s energy.

In 2008, Combat Feeding began fielding the First Strike Ration, a compact assault ration designed to be eaten on the move. It consists of many of the items found in the MRE, but can be carried in a cargo pocket and doesn’t need to be eaten with a spoon.

Smith said the goal is to increase Soldiers caloric intake throughout the day in combat operations while eliminating the need to stop and heat up the food.

She said they are currently testing around six new flavors for the First Strike Ration’s pocket sandwiches.

“The rations are never good enough,” Kennedy said. “We’re always looking to improve them and to be in alignment with what the current warfighter wants and also meeting nutritional needs.”



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