

UCook delivers crafted convenience

By Lauren Hartzenberg

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UCook is evolving into more than just South Africa's most popular meal kit service. With launches of both a [market box](#) offering and a frozen ready-made Craft Meals range this year, the company is evolving into a nimble provider of convenient food solutions.



The frozen Craft Meals range, UCook's latest project, has been designed by some of South Africa's most celebrated chefs, including Sarah Graham, Lapo Magni, Kevin Joseph, Courtney Lawry and Oliver Swart.

Consumers can expect local and international classics, like Durban Lamb Curry, Melanzane alla Parmigiana and Pulled Beef Enchilada, which are all thoughtfully composed and made using fresh, quality ingredients – as is the UCook standard. Flavour and freshness are preserved as the meals are flash-frozen and simply require heating before being eaten.

Chris Verster-Cohen, who founded UCook along with David Torr in 2015, says that the frozen meal range came about from the understanding that people don't always have the energy or inspiration to prepare a nutritious, delicious and balanced meal every day of the week – especially with the additional strain the pandemic brought about in 2020.

"With UCook Craft Meals, you're able to stock up effortlessly and select something from your freezer that's ready quickly, with no preparation or effort," he adds.

Foray into physical retail

Frozen and convenience meals have remained a growing trend in food retail, with many of SA's supermarkets expanding these ranges to offer greater variety and meet customer demand. UCook began its foray into physical retail in September thanks to an exclusive partnership with Pick n Pay that allows UCook fans to shop its Craft Meals range in selected Pick n Pay stores.

Initially a Western Cape in-store pilot, the partnership may expand to more stores and provinces based on customer feedback. This is the first time UCook's offering has been made available in a physical retailer.



UCook gets physical with Pick n Pay partnership

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Verster-Cohen says that he's excited to see how the frozen meal range interfaces with UCook's successful meal-kit business.

"We hope that our family of customers will enjoy the ability to segue between UCook Meal Kit and UCook Craft Meals over the course of a week – enjoying the experience of preparing a nutritious meal from scratch versus taking a night off to enjoy the same level of taste and nutrition from the Craft Meals range."

Here, Verster-Cohen shares more UCook's push into convenience meals and its entry into physical stores.

■ What consumer trends or behaviours did UCook pick up on that inspired the launch of a frozen meal range?

As a company providing customers with easy-to-cook meal kits, we understood that people are still looking for even more convenient solutions to meal times that involve no cooking, but don't come with the unhealthiness of an instant takeaway or typical frozen prepared meal.

The Craft Meals range was developed in response to people not always having the time, energy or inspiration that it takes to prepare a meal from scratch, but want a ready-made meal that's full of nutrients and flavours and tastes as if it's been made fresh in your own kitchen.

Our Craft Meals range has been in production for some time, and the onset of the coronavirus definitely sped up the process as people were more hesitant to head to the shops to buy meals. The importance of having nutritious, wholesome meal options available in the freezer came to the fore, and so our launch made more and more sense.

Time will always be a factor that governs healthy eating as a healthy diet requires planning and preparation. And as society becomes far more time-pressed (again), so the need for a solution like this increases tenfold.

■ Where are the Craft Meals made?

The meals were initially designed by top SA food talent, like the Oyster Box's Chef Kevin Joseph and cookbook author and foodie Sarah Graham, and are prepared and flash-frozen at a facility in Cape Town.

■ How have you had to adapt your operations to provide this new product?

We've developed new warehouse production and packing systems as well as logistical operations to work in tandem with

our existing products, and we're excited to enter the on-demand space with our Craft Meals.

Transporting a product requiring refrigeration is very different to transporting a frozen product. We're lucky to have found partners that are experts in this field and the process of gearing up has been simple and straightforward.

■ Why did UCook decide to make its meals available through a physical retail channel for the first time? And are there any unique challenges that accompany this decision?

E-commerce in South Africa is still a growing behaviour – certainly accelerated by the likes of a global pandemic! Like many e-tailers in our country, we realised that at some point we wanted to explore the possibilities of physical retail to grow our brand and offering, and Pick n Pay provided the best possible solution for that exploration.

They've been a fantastic partner offering us the opportunity to have branded freezer units in store and the chance to trial the process in their Western Cape stores. Customers can now look forward to a fresh new UCook experience in leading Pick n Pay stores and access Craft Meals as part of their routine grocery shop.

We're hoping to expand this dramatically over the coming year and have seen a great response to being in a physical store so far.

UCook's Craft Meals are available from the [UCook website](#) and from selected Pick n Pay stores in the Western Cape. Prices range from R59 for single portions to R361 for a four-portion serving of a free-range-meat-based dish.

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