

The quiet power of the pantry

How staples are driving retail growth

<https://stockcake.com/i/grocery-store-staples>

“When retailers anchor the basket wisely, they are not just driving sales – they are strengthening their relevance in the everyday lives of South African consumers”

Overview

South African shoppers are buying fewer FMCG products than before, but pantry staples continue to hold their ground. In a time of economic pressure, boxed, canned, frozen and shelf-stable foods remain the backbone of the grocery basket.

For some households, stocking up on these essentials has become easier, especially for those with the means to buy in bulk. For others, affordability still dictates choice. Many consumers continue to rely on the cheaper and familiar products that stretch meals further and keep households fed.

Healthy-for-you options are expanding rapidly, but for many shoppers they remain a luxury. For most South Africans, affordability remains the first consideration.

For retailers, this means ensuring consistent availability of core pantry ingredients. These products enable quick and convenient meal solutions while forming the base of everyday shopping baskets. When retailers understand the role these staples play in daily life, they can improve assortment



Vanessa Hall

planning, reduce out-of-stocks and support repeat store visits.

According to Vanessa Hall, Country Manager, Worldpanel

volume down 9.8%. Encouragingly, the rate of decline eased during the year – from 10.8% in Q1 to 7.8% in the final quarter – suggesting early signs of stabilisation.

Division in Kantar, economic pressures continue to shape consumer spending. Research indicates that while FMCG volumes fell by almost 10%, the rate of decline slowed in the second half of 2024 as economic conditions showed signs of improvement.

South Africans purchased fewer FMCG products in 2024 than the previous year, according to the latest State of the Nation report. While take-home spend reached R387 billion across 115 tracked categories in 2024, the market's value declined by 4.8% year-on-year, reflecting reduced FMCG consumption.

The average household bought nearly 100 fewer packs in 2024, with overall

Serves: 4
Preparation time: 10 minutes
Cooking time: 1h:15 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- Glug of olive oil
- 6-8 chicken thighs and/or drumsticks
- Salt and milled pepper
- ½ coil (150g) chorizo, sliced
- 4-5 baby onions, halved
- 3-4 garlic cloves, sliced
- 2 Tbsp (30ml) smoked or regular paprika
- 2 Tbsp (30ml) butter
- Handful of fresh basil, stalks removed
- 2 cups (500ml) chicken stock
- 1 cup (250ml) fresh cream
- 1 can (400g) butter beans, drained
- 1 can (400g) red kidney beans, drained
- 1 lime



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Method:

- Preheat the oven to 200°C.
- Heat the oil in a large ovenproof dish fitted with a lid.
- Season the chicken with salt and pepper and toss it together with olive oil.
- Brown the chicken evenly in batches for about 4-5 minutes each. Remove from the pan.
- Add the chorizo and fry for 3-5 minutes or until crispy. Remove from the heat.
- Lower the heat slightly and fry the onions for 6-8 minutes.
- Add the garlic, paprika, butter and basil and fry for 2-3 minutes.
- Add the chicken and chorizo back to the pan, along with the chicken stock. Cover and bake in the oven for about 20-30 minutes.
- Add the cream, butter beans, and red kidney beans, and return to the oven for an additional 10-12 minutes.
- Remove from the oven, then add a squeeze of lime juice and season to taste if needed.
- Serve with crusty bread, buttery mash or a side salad.



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From survival to strategy: How categories shift across income segments

For some households, buying pantry staples is simply about survival. For others, it has become a value strategy.

Across South Africa's diverse income groups, grocery shopping behaviour varies significantly. Economic pressure affects everyone, but it shapes category performance differently depending on geography and household income.

In lower-income and rural markets, canned and boxed foods often dominate the basket. These products offer affordability, long shelf life and convenience, particularly where refrigeration infrastructure may be limited. Smaller pack sizes and entry-level pricing remain critical in these markets, with private labels playing an important role in delivering perceived value.

Research from the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group (PMBEJD) highlights the pressure households face when it comes to food affordability. Their latest Household Affordability Index paints a concerning picture of rising food costs.

The cost of the essential household food basket increased marginally from February to March 2025 by R16.14, bringing the total basket cost to R5 329.36. This represents a rise of 0.3%. Over the past year, the basket has increased by R51.43, or 1.0%, compared with March 2024.

Civil society organisations immediately raised concerns, warning that rising living costs are pushing many communities deeper into poverty

<https://pmbejd.org.za/>



and food insecurity. Among the 44 items tracked by the PMBEJD, 22 recorded price increases in March. Core staples such as rice, maize meal, white sugar, cake flour, beans, samp and cooking oil were among those affected. Mervyn Abrahams, PMBEJD's programme coordinator, said ...



Mervyn Abrahams

“ These items take up proportionally the most money in the household purse, and are bought first. This means that the diversity of the family diet is dependent on the total cost of the staple foods, as the more nutrient-rich foods like eggs, meats, dairy and vegetables, are only bought after the core staple foods have been secured. ”

The challenge facing many households is clear. Since 2021, the cost of a basic food basket has increased by more than 26%. This has left many South Africans with less disposable income and has influenced where and how they shop.

Retailers and suppliers are responding by adjusting promotions, refining pack sizes and reconsidering pricing structures across different retail channels.

What retailers can do to help

Financial pressure is reshaping grocery spending in South Africa. Retailers and suppliers can no longer rely solely on pricing tactics to address the challenges consumers face. The shift in shopping behaviour appears structural rather than temporary.



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Shoppers are increasingly dividing their spending across different retail formats and prioritising visible value. To respond effectively, retailers need a coordinated approach that considers pricing, assortment, promotions and channel strategy.

Retailers and suppliers are also adapting to what is known as format evolution – the rebalancing of retail channels in response to economic pressure, digital adoption and shifting shopper priorities.

This means:

- Adapting pack sizes and pricing by retail format
- Designing channel-specific promotions
- Rethinking assortment strategies
- Accepting that shopper loyalty is increasingly format-fluid

Growth is no longer simply about increasing sales volumes. It is about recognising where and how South Africans are spending their grocery budgets.

Discounters such as Boxer, SaveMor and U-Save continue to gain traction. These stores offer simplified ranges and focus heavily on essential products that meet budget-conscious consumer needs. Unlike traditional supermarkets that provide broader assortments and full services, discounters prioritise everyday low prices and efficient shopping experiences.

Together, these retailers recorded growth of 13.9% year-on-year, demonstrating strong affordability-driven retail momentum across income groups.

At the same time, FMCG e-commerce continues to expand rapidly, growing by approximately 40%



<https://www.kantar.com/>

year-on-year. Platforms such as Pick n Pay Asap!, SPAR2U, Checkers Sixty60 and Woolies Dash are reshaping convenience shopping.

Retailers and suppliers can respond by:

Developing channel-specific SKUs – entry-price packs for discounters and convenience-focused packs for e-commerce.

Aligning pack sizes with consumer cash-flow realities – single-serve options for daily shoppers and bulk formats for payday shoppers.

Improving product visibility online, where search results and stock availability increasingly influence basket inclusion as much as shelf placement in store.

Discounters are no longer niche formats. They are becoming major volume drivers in South African retail. At the same time, online platforms continue to reshape urgent and convenience shopping.

Suppliers that adapt innovation across both channels are likely to gain a stronger share of the market.

“ As shoppers buy fewer packs and stretch household budgets, boxed, canned and frozen staples are becoming strategic drivers of basket stability. ”

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The reason why pantry staples thrive

Pantry staples remain non-negotiable for most households. Even when prices increase, these products stay at the top of the grocery list. They are typically purchased before more expensive or perishable items, highlighting their essential role in household budgets. In price-sensitive environments, private labels and affordable staple formats are becoming increasingly important.

From a retailer's perspective, some subcategories are performing particularly well.

Pick n' Pay Manager in Braamfontein, John Ndlhovu, says that ...

“ I have to say the cans, because we're selling a lot of cans. Most people prefer more boxed and canned stuff, than in a bottle because it's safer in terms of handling, storage (for transportation as well) and maybe at home. ”

Private label sales have grown significantly in recent years. Estimates suggest that private label FMCG value is approaching R98 billion as more shoppers turn to lower-cost alternatives that still offer reliable quality.

Retail promotions reflect this trend. Major retailers such as Pick n Pay frequently focus promotional activity on staple items like sugar and rice during peak shopping periods such as Black Friday and the festive season.

For shoppers under financial pressure, pantry staples provide predictable cost per use, long shelf life and dependable meal planning.



Food security and South Africa's stock-up culture

South Africa has developed a strong stock-up culture driven by pay-day shopping cycles, grant payments, economic uncertainty and fluctuating food prices.

Shelf-stable foods such as canned products, boxed staples and frozen items sit at the centre of this behaviour. These products provide reassurance and allow households to manage food planning over longer periods.

John also noted the importance of promotions in driving bulk purchasing behaviour.

“ Yes, promotions play a bigger role. That's why every week or second week, we try to alter our promotions because promotions are what attracts customers. ”

“ They like to get more volume for less. Because, based on the economy right now, it affects everybody. Salaries are increasing by 6%. Inflation is sitting at 17%, which is pressure for everybody. So, you always want to get more for less. ”

Many shoppers plan their purchases around promotional cycles, loyalty rewards and month-end specials. Frozen foods also play an important role in this stock-up mindset because they provide longer storage while maintaining perceived freshness. For retailers, this behaviour creates opportunities around promotional timing, particularly near month-end, grant payment dates and seasonal peaks. However, maintaining trust through consistent base pricing and clear value communication remains equally important.



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Healthy-for-you options and private labels: Growing demand

Even in a price-sensitive market, health and nutrition remain important considerations for many shoppers.

John spoke about how private label and health-focused ranges are gaining traction in stores.

“Remember, when you run business, you need to ensure that everybody has been given a fair share to sell their items at the store level. We are catering for that.

In the store, much as we'd like to push our lines, most of the private labels are being given a fair chance to advertise their products and we give them a fair share on the shelves.”

Research indicates that roughly two-thirds of South African shoppers see value in healthier food options and are willing to pay a premium for more nutritious alternatives. More than 40% actively look for organic or plant-based options while shopping.

Younger consumers, particularly millennials and Generation Z, are leading this shift. Interest in foods with added health benefits – including vitamins, minerals and plant-based alternatives – continues to grow.

For retailers and suppliers, this suggests that health-focused positioning is moving beyond niche categories and entering the mainstream.

<https://stockcake.com/i/busy-cafeteria-line>



Sustainability and local sourcing

Sustainability is also becoming an increasingly important factor in purchasing decisions. Many South African consumers show strong support for locally sourced products and environmentally responsible packaging.

In pantry categories, this often appears through recyclable packaging formats such as cans and glass

Pantry staples provide predictable cost per use, long shelf life and dependable meal planning for households under pressure.

bottles. These materials are widely recyclable and align with growing environmental awareness among shoppers.

Local sourcing also resonates strongly with

South African consumers. Retailers that partner with local farmers and producers demonstrate support for local economies while strengthening supply chain transparency.

For shoppers, value is increasingly measured not only in price but also in origin, trust and community impact.

Frozen vegetables and fruit: Convenience and value

Frozen foods are becoming an important part of the modern pantry. They offer a balance of convenience, nutrition and affordability.

Unlike fresh produce, which can spoil quickly, frozen fruit and vegetables are processed and frozen at peak maturity. This preserves flavour and nutrients while reducing food waste.



Hitesh Verma

Hitesh Verma, the CEO at Concept Foods, explained how frozen products are performing strongly in the market ...

“Frozen appetisers are at the forefront of our growth. A growing demand for convenience has seen

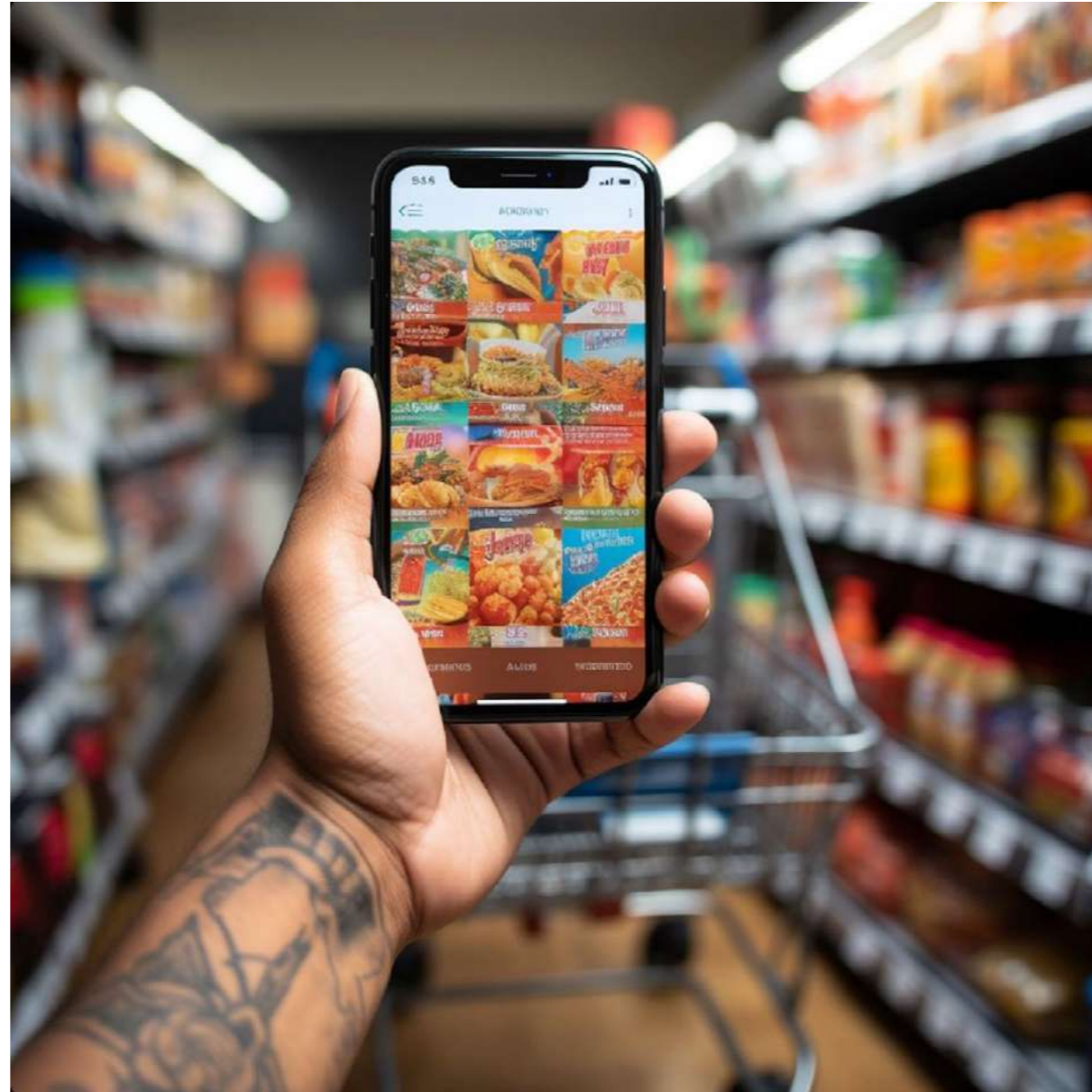
this category grow substantially over the last five years. 24/25 has seen year-on-year growth of 28%.”

“Consumers’ tastes have evolved and the demand for international flavours and variety keeps growing. We strive to provide the SA consumer with a diverse range of products and, through our retail channel partners, accessibility has become easier on a national scale.”

From a value perspective, frozen foods can often deliver better cost efficiency due to their extended shelf life and reduced waste.

However, retailers must continue investing in reliable cold chain infrastructure. Power disruptions and limited freezer space can present challenges, particularly in areas affected by load shedding.

<https://stockcake.com/i/shopping-with-smartphone>



Implications for retailers and suppliers

Pantry staples are far more than background groceries. They form the backbone of South Africa’s food economy.

As shoppers buy fewer packs and stretch household budgets, boxed, canned and frozen staples are becoming strategic drivers of basket stability. They build shopper trust, support repeat visits and deliver consistent turnover when other categories fluctuate.

For retailers and suppliers, the opportunity lies not only in volume growth but also in understanding the broader role these products play in food security, nutrition and household planning.

Success will depend on improving pack-price design, strengthening private label ranges and aligning retail strategies with different shopping formats – from spaza shops to supermarkets and e-commerce platforms.

The retailers that succeed will be those that recognise pantry staples not as low-

margin necessities, but as powerful drivers of basket loyalty and long-term shopper trust.

When retailers and suppliers anchor the basket wisely, they are not just driving sales – they are strengthening their relevance in the everyday lives of South African consumers. **SR**

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 10 Pantry Staples Found in SA Kitchens - Foodie
 Inside the South African pantry: Food & Home Magazine
 Household food basket cost shows mixed trends
 Pantry buys: trending groceries | News24

