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Slim cans, smarter wraps: Food packaging gets a reboot

Most Australians rarely think about the packaging that encases what they eat or drink – the milk bottle that slots neatly into the fridge door, the salad bag that keeps leaves crisp for days or the snack wrapper that disappears into the recycling bin after lunch.

However, new analysis from ANZ shows these everyday packs are now central to one of the biggest opportunities – and challenges – facing Australia's food and beverage sector in 2026.

Sara McCluskey, Head of Diversified Industries at ANZ, says packaging has shifted from a background cost to a frontline strategy; as companies navigate rising input costs, new sustainability expectations, and changing consumer preferences.

"Packaging used to be something you opened and immediately discarded. Now, it helps determine which product shoppers pick up on the supermarket shelf, how efficiently a product moves through the supply chain, and whether it's ready for export markets," Ms McCluskey said.

As explored in ANZ's Food for Thought – Summer 2025/26 report, Australians generate approximately 7 million tonnes of packaging each year – roughly 264 kilograms per person across paper, glass, plastic, metal and wood, with food and beverage packaging contributing to a major share of this total.

Australian packaging regulations are tightening, and retailers are raising expectations around recyclability, clear labelling and container refunds. At the same time, overseas markets are also moving quickly.

"The European Union is shifting to fully recyclable packaging by 2030. While Australian manufacturers don't face those rules yet, many are preparing now to stay ahead of domestic changes and keep the door open for future exports. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity.

"Companies are redesigning packaging to use less material, make recycling easier, and meet global standards; without adding unnecessary costs for Australian households," Ms McCluskey continued.

Innovation is already on supermarket shelves. Lighter wine bottles and slimmer cans cut freight fuel and reduce breakage. Salad bags use tiny laser pinholes to keep leaves crisp for longer, and edible coatings mean fruit from Queensland can arrive in Asia firm and fresh without using heavy plastic. High-pressure processing lets dips and ready meals shift from multilayer pouches to clear, single-plastic tubs that recycling centres can easily recognise.

Supermarkets are also tightening their packaging requirements, and recycling centres increasingly prefer simpler materials, meaning exporters are designing for the toughest global market first.

"For many Australian food and beverage companies, smarter packaging is quietly becoming a competitive strength. The businesses that get this right can cut waste, improve shelf appeal and reach more markets – while helping shoppers feel more confident about what goes in the recycling bin," Ms McCluskey concluded.

Further insights can be found in the Summer 2025/26 edition of ANZ's Food for Thought report.

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