

# Summertime shortages: Why you can't find chicken wings, chlorine, or a new washer this summer

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A COVID-19 hangover is creating shortages and higher prices caused by snarled supply chains. Here's why it'll be hard to find chicken wings and more.

Alexander Coolidge, Cincinnati Enquirer Published 6:29 a.m. ET May 31, 2021 | Updated 7:48 a.m. ET June 1, 2021

Summertime is perfect for bike rides, cookouts, home improvements and relaxing by the pool.

But a COVID-19 hangover from 2020 is threatening many of those traditions as shop owners struggle with shortages and higher prices created by snarled supply chains.

Last year, manufacturers stopped producing in-demand items in health-related shutdown. Now, many are having trouble returning to full production because of a nationwide labor shortage.

In some cases, there's no shortage of product – but it's not available because it's stuck on a ship in the Port of Los Angeles, where there aren't enough laborers to unload boats.

On top of those challenges, the supply of popular items has been affected by some additional calamity just as demand has taken off.

And after being stuck at home in 2020, consumer demand is ravenous – and fueled by unspent vacation money and government stimulus dollars.

Here are some major items seeing price increases, shortages and delays in 2021:

## Chicken wings and other meat products

Food prices are spiking across the country and meat products are some of the hardest hit, including chicken wings.

"We're having a problem getting them – I'm shorted all the time," said Jason Esterkamp, co-owner of O'Bryan's Bar & Grill in Cincinnati's O'Bryonville business district, adding his chicken wing prices have more than doubled since last year.

The pub owner said he'd be tempted to take them off his menu if they weren't a signature dish.

"It would be like going to Graeter's to get a piece of cake," Esterkamp said, referring to the iconic Cincinnati-based ice cream chain.

He's got plenty of company.

Restaurateurs face a triple-whammy on meat costs: there's plenty of chicken for meat, but processing plants are short-staffed and can't keep up with demand since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Also hurting the supply: the deep freeze that hit Texas early this year killed a lot of livestock. Lastly, chicken wings' popularity has invited a raft of added competition even by restaurants that typically didn't offer them.

"The prices are the highest I've seen in 15 years," said Nader Masadeh, chief executive of suburban Cincinnati-based regional chain Buffalo Wings & Rings. "It's a big problem – every week, we thought we'd seen the ceiling, but then it would go up."

Masadeh said the chain with a dozen local restaurants and dozens more in the Midwest, Texas, Florida and internationally, is currently eating the added costs. That might change if costs remain high and larger competitors increase the price of their menu.

The bottleneck at processing plants is also affecting prices and availability for some pork products.

Dan Glier, president of Glier's Goetta in Covington, Kentucky, said pork chops aren't in short supply, but a lot of meat byproducts used for sausage-making aren't getting the same production priority. Meat processing companies are short-handed and have cut back some operations.

The shortfall has forced Glier to hustle to find needed supplies to maintain his usual production of goetta, a Cincinnati staple made of sausage with oats.

"We've run into things like suppliers sending half a truckload," Glier said.

## **Chlorine shortage stings**

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Pool owners getting ready to plunge into the water this summer are learning there's a nationwide shortage of chlorine in 2021.

That's after the pandemic prompted American consumers to install nearly 100,000 new swimming pools last year – a 24% increase in construction activity that shattered a nearly 40-year-old growth record for the industry, according to Alexandria, Virginia-based trade group the Pool and Hot Tub Alliance.

While there are more consumers looking for the chemical to keep pools clear there's another major complication: one of the nation's big producers, Bio-Lab, saw its production capabilities hobbled last summer by a major fire in Louisiana.

"The last skid I got was gone in eight hours," said Mark Hauser, owner of Riley's Pools & Spas in the Cincinnati suburb of Green Township. His suppliers have resorted to rationing clients to 2020 levels. "I've sold 90% of what I'm allowed."

Hauser said his suppliers know he needs more chlorine tablets sold in 25-pound buckets. When they become available, his supplier calls saying it's available - but it's been a couple of weeks since the last one.

"The Bio-Lab factory burnt to the ground – it simply went 'Bye-bye,' " Hauser said, adding the shortage has shifted some customers toward switching to salt-water pools.

## **Lumber demand and costs soar**

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Local builders say America is nesting, spending money on their homes after spending much of 2020 inside with their families.

"We had no idea what we were getting into last year (headed into the pandemic) and it just exploded on us," said Tom Allison, project manager at Blackrock Construction in Cincinnati's Over-The-Rhine neighborhood. "People said the building boom was spurred by restless residents stuck in their houses. 'If we're going to be stuck at home, we might as well enjoy it.'"

Wood prices have soared 300% since last year, according to trade group the National Association of Home Builders. That's enough to add almost \$36,000 to the average cost of construction of a new home.

Allison, who focuses on kitchen and bathroom remodels and home additions, said the strong demand has driven wood costs sky-high. On top of that, a labor shortage constantly threatens delays in the industry.

## **Freezers, washers and appliances on back order**

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That nesting urge by homeowners with stimulus money burning a hole in their pockets is also blamed for a shortage of household appliances. But other factors have come into play.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, many consumers hoarded food loading their pantries. But they also bought chest freezers to store other perishables.

"Early on, it was a running joke that if we'd ordered more freezers ahead of time we could have retired with all the money," said Kevin David, owner of the Appliance Loft in Cincinnati's Oakley neighborhood. He had one day where his store got 17 calls about freezers and has

had as many as 40 on backorder.

After that came weeks of families stuck at home with loads and loads of laundry. Washers and driers were the next appliances to take off in sales.

Demand spread to just about every kind of appliance there was as people sought upgrades to their homes. Then the supply chain started having big problems.

Shutdowns and quarantines during the pandemic not only affected retail stores but factories and shipping ports.

With many appliances and other goods imported from China, shiploads have been caught in the snarled traffic in the Port of Los Angeles and other ports that don't have enough labor to unload all the in-demand cargo. That's frustrated a lot of customers anxiously awaiting delivery.

In this Wednesday, March 3, 2021 photo, container cargo ships are seen docked in the Port of Los Angeles. Off the coast of California, dozens of container ships have been anchored, unable to unload their cargo. (Photo: Damian Dovarganes, AP)

"People seem to think we are making these products in the backroom – that's not the case," David said.

While many customers can manage through the delays by ordering ahead, those dealing with a sudden breakdown are getting pinched badly.

"It's your 'My washing machine just died' customer who's really getting hurt by this," David said.

## **New bicycles remain a rarity**

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Consumers looking for more exercise and a fun way to commute will find it difficult to buy a new bicycle.

Since many are manufactured overseas, incoming store inventory was first snarled by pandemic conditions – then labor shortages at international ports.

"The demand is there but the product is not. I haven't gotten a new bike since last March," said Ron Keilholz, owner of Bicycles & More in suburban Green Township, outside Cincinnati. "Ninety-five percent of our stuff comes from China and it's not getting unloaded from the cargo ships. It's not getting to our suppliers."

Normally, this time of the year, his shop would have more than 100 bicycles in stock. Right now, there are five – three older ones that his shop repaired and two new ones, including one built for a rider about 6-foot-6 in height.

A lack of new bikes has boosted demand for repair services the shop does, he said. But he added they're starting to have problems getting news parts too.