

AUGUST 8, 1988

\$2.00

# ADWEEK'S MARKETING WEEK

**Inside: Promote Magazine**

.....

**Ex-Beatrice Executive  
Cooks Up Entrees for Kids**

.....

**Mazda Readies Drive  
To Blow Its Own Horn**

## **Ex-Beatrice Executive Cooks Up Meals for Kids**

When she was fired from Beatrice Cos. two years ago, Mary Anne Jackson found herself with a wealth of knowledge about the food business. And what she didn't know, her 1-year-old daughter taught her. Now Jackson is marketing a line of shelf-stable microwaveable meals for kids with working mothers. Available by mail since December, My Own Meals rolls into a Chicago grocery chain next week.

**17**

## ENTREPRENEURS

# Former Beatrice Executive Develops Microwaveable Entrees for Kids

*Mother markets shelf-stable fare for children with working moms*

By Christine Donahue

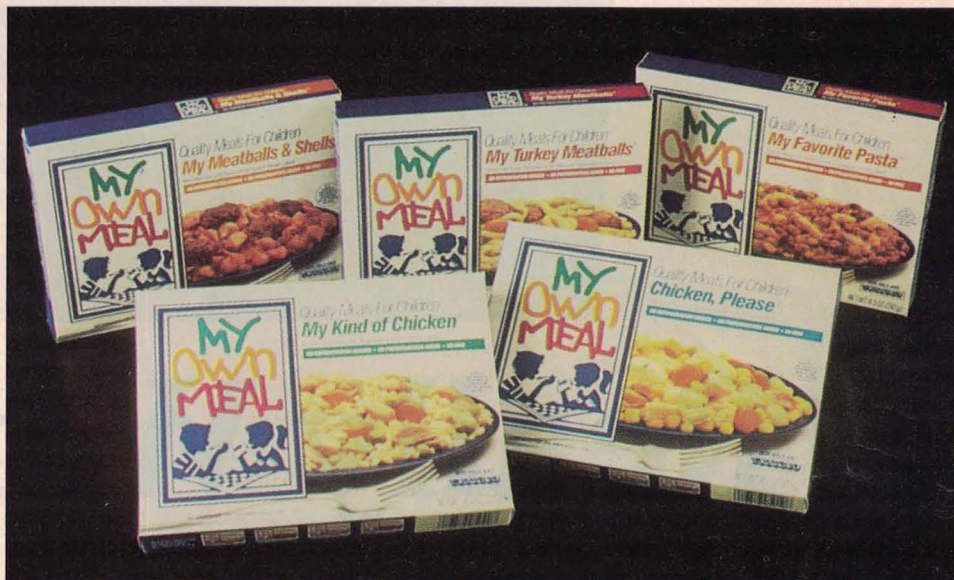
**M**icrowaveable meals and entrees have been growing at such a pace that a shakeout seems inevitable. But one niche in the convenience-meal market has been left curiously unclaimed: meals for children. It's a substantial market to ignore, considering that nearly 57% of married women with children under age 6 hold jobs.

Now one veteran of a major food company has combined her business savvy with her experience as a mother to take advantage of this gap. Mary Anne Jackson, who was fired after Beatrice Cos. underwent a leveraged buyout in 1986, spent the last two years developing My Own Meals, a line of shelf-stable, microwaveable meals for children ages 2 to 8. The line has been available by mail order from My Own Meals Inc. in Deerfield, Ill. since December. Eight grocery stores in Chicago have carried it since last month, and Dominick's Finer Foods, the second-largest grocery chain in Chicago, will begin stocking it next week.

Jackson says she spent eight years at Beatrice "doing a little bit of everything." As director of operations and planning at the Swift/Eckrich division, she worked on distribution and production problems and evaluated product lines. She also worked at developing retort packaging, a method in which food is sealed in a plastic pouch and then cooked in a pressure cooker. The packages are airtight, so food stays fresh without refrigeration. Retort packaging is the feature common to the only other shelf-stable food products on the market: General Foods Corp.'s Impromptu, Geo. A. Hormel & Co.'s Top Shelf, and The Dial Corp.'s Lunch Bucket. Dominick's, incidentally, has settled the question of where to stock shelf-stable foods like these by creating a microwaveable-food section.

Jackson returned to work following the birth of her first child in 1985, but faced the question of what to feed her daughter once she outgrew prepared baby foods. Flipping through nutrition guides and cookbooks, she experimented with meals that her babysitter could reheat and serve when Jackson worked late or traveled on business.

When Jackson found herself without a job,



**Dominick's, the second-largest grocery chain in Chicago, will begin stocking it next week.**

she started her own company, betting that her hunch—that she was part of a larger market—was correct. She polled 2,000 mothers to find out what they most wanted to feed their children. Then she hired a children's nutritionist and developed 24 meals that could be prepared quickly. A taste-test among more than 100 children was next.

Although My Own Meals has a moderate amount of salt, the line does not contain preservatives. The meals take 1½ minutes to prepare in a microwave oven, or four minutes in a pot of boiling water. Jackson, who has been living on savings and her husband's income, says the company spent less than \$200,000 to bring My Own Meals to market.

"A big company would've spent millions just on consultants and surveys," she says.

My Own Meals, which is packed under contract by a South Carolina plant, comes in five varieties. One, Chicken, Please contains pieces of chicken, potatoes, corn, carrots and chicken broth. Another, My Favorite Pasta is ground pork, lentils, barley, tomato sauce and macaroni. Jackson will substitute pinto beans for lentils if My Own Meals moves into Southern markets.

The grocery trade seems optimistic about

the brand's chances. "There's no competition," says Bob Komorous, a buyer with the Village Market in Deerfield. "It's a totally different product." My Own Meals, however, is more expensive than other processed foods for children. The line sells from \$2.39 to \$2.99, while Chef-Boy-Ar-Dee costs \$1.09.

"Everyone I've talked to who has tried it likes it," Komorous says. "It sells well, and I see mothers ask kids which kind they want."

So far the company has done little advertising, though an article on My Own Meals in *The Chicago Tribune* probably gave sales a boost, as has word-of-mouth. Paul Costouros, the co-owner of Carnival Groceries in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood, picked up the line when his partner's wife wanted to try it. "I'm absolutely re-ordering," he says.

If My Own Meals is successful, it should cause marketing departments at food companies around the country to echo with the question of why they didn't come up with it first. To Jackson, the answer is simple. "How many of those people who run those companies or divisions are men? They don't deal with the problem of what to feed their kids, and they don't care," she says. ■