

Packaging Digest

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*Retort pouch
has another go
at retail*

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A small start-up company in Deerfield, Ill., has created a new retail application for the retort pouch: nutritionally-balanced meals tailored to appeal to young children.

My Own Meals, Inc., currently markets its line of five entrees in its own Chicagoland region. Its biggest customers are Jewel and Dominick's, two of the leading supermarket chains in the area. Both have agreed to test the product in selected stores. The 8-oz items sell for \$2.39 to \$2.99.

The brains behind the meals is Mary Anne Jackson. Formerly an employee of Beatrice Foods, she had eight years' experience in accounting, then strategic planning and finally operations. Her familiarity with the food industry told her that nutritious kids' meals conveniently packaged were a scarce commodity. Her fledgling firm aims to change that. She's not bothered by the retort pouch's checkered past in the retail arena; she's studied some of the pouch's commercial failures, notably Kraft's with its a la Carte line, and has positioned her product differently.

"I've talked to Kraft and others who tried to market a retort pouch in retail stores," she says. "And it seems to me that the shortcoming of their products was that they weren't offering anything new to the marketplace other than packaging. That's

My Own Meals are shelf-stable children's products pouched in all-plastic. Success in a Chicago-area test could revive the nearly defunct retort pouch.



where My Own Meals differs. We've set out to meet needs clearly expressed by parents we've surveyed. They told us they wanted nutritional balance, convenience, portability, ease of opening, microwavability and portioning geared specifically for kids. We're saying, this is it."

Another mistake made by earlier marketers of retort pouches, notes Jackson, was poor consumer education. There was the feeling that consumers had to be told how a pouch could be as shelf-stable as a can. The message just never got across clearly. It was a communications problem that hurt marketplace acceptance of the pouch.

'Everything you asked for'

In the marketing efforts behind My Own Meals, says Jackson, the subject of retort pouch technology will not be addressed. Instead, the firm's attitude will essentially be: "Here's everything you asked for in a child's meal, and oh, by the way, it's in this pouch you're really going to love," says Jackson.

Cooking instructions are printed in English and Spanish on both carton and pouch. The pouch can be microwaved in a minute and a half or placed in boiling water for four minutes. If microwaved, the pouch must first be punctured with a fork for venting.

The preservative-free product line was developed by Jackson and food
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My Own Meals

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nutritionists Hess & Hunt. The meals have no preservatives or MSG. Graphics on both pouch and carton, designed by Wencel/Hess Design, emphasize this quality. The .018 SBS cartons are printed offset in five colors plus water-based coating by Chapco.

The cartons are scored and perforated in such a way that half of the top panel opens up and folds back. This makes it easy to remove the pouch. But the primary function of the perf and score is a merchandising one. Jackson explains: "Printed on the back of that top panel is a 'My Own Card.' This sort of thing is unbelievably popular these days with kids. It becomes their own calling card after they cut it out, so it's a free bonus for them. For us it's a means of getting our name passed around because the calling card has our colorful logo printed on the opposite side. That kind of exposure is extremely important for us at this stage."

All-plastic laminate

Because microwavability was a major objective of the project, an all-plastic pouch material became a necessity. Jackson chose a structure from American National Can.

Confidentiality agreements between My Own Meals and ANC make it difficult to ascertain precise film components. However, it's likely that the structure is similar to the all-plastic one Ludlow supplied for the Kretschmar retort pouch (see sidebar). Ludlow has since been acquired by ANC. A call to the Mount Vernon,

Ohio, facility formerly known as Ludlow Flexible Packaging confirms that the material for My Own Meals is being produced there.

The Kretschmar pouch was a three-layer laminate of polyester/polyvinylidene chloride/polypropylene. Though Kretschmar's pouch was unprinted, the My Own Meals pouch is brightly printed in one color on a gravure press. Jackson says it has a shelf life of at least one year. While market testing proceeds, neither pouch nor carton receives a "best-used-by" date. But Jackson plans to add an embossed use-by date once the product moves into broader distribution.

CP with experience

Greenville, Tenn.-based Sopakco produces the My Own Meals pouch in its Bennettsville, S.C., facility. Sopakco has for some years been a principal supplier of MRE (Meals-Ready-to-Eat) pouched rations to the U.S. military.

Preformed pouches are magazine-fed to an Old Rivers pouch-sealing system. Mounted on the pouch sealer is a Raque filler that discharges most of a meal's contents. Where meatballs or other large particulates need to be included, however, they're manually inserted to ensure a proper count.

Heat-sealed pouches are conveyed past a Hi-Speed checkweigher that automatically rejects improperly filled pouches. Operators then load the pouches into baskets for cooking in a Stork retort. They're retorted at 250 deg F for about 30 minutes. Finally, they're cartoned semi-automatically on an Adco unit.

Sopakco sales manager Gene Gasque says the all-plastic pouch is a little less rigid than more conventional retort pouch laminates because it does not include foil. But filling and sealing are executed with little difficulty on the same machines used for the standard pouches. About the only significant change, says Gasque, is in the sealing temperature, which can be slightly lower with an all-plastic pouch.

With so many food marketers now introducing entrees in retortable thermoformed trays with flexible lidstock, why did My Own Meals opt for the pouch? Jackson cites two reasons. First, it's more transportable than a tray as it fits very easily into purse or, for that matter, briefcase. And second, Jackson's surveys and interviews with parents elicited some concern over the prospect of microwaving foods for children. For those who share this concern, the pouch can be readily boiled in 4½ minutes.

"We identified a whole group of people who said, and I use their term, that they didn't want to 'nuke' food for their children. I suspect the fear is that food may be overheated or else have dangerous hot spots in it. But the same group who didn't like the microwave also made it clear that they didn't want to heat a conventional oven for a small meal. So with the pouch they can prepare the meal in a pan of boiling water. That's not easily done with a tray."

More information is available from:
Hess and Hunt, Inc., 560 Green Bay Rd., Ste. 400, Winnetka, Ill. 60093.
Circle No. 247.

Wencel/Hess Design Co., 320 N. Michigan Ave., Ste. 1504, Chicago, Ill. 60601. *Circle No. 248.*

Chapco Carton Co., 1810 N. 5th Ave., River Grove, Ill. 60171. *Circle No. 249.*

American National Can Co., 8770 W. Bryn Mawr, Chicago, Ill. 60631. *Circle No. 250.*

Sopakco, Box 877, Greenville, Tenn. 37744. *Circle No. 251.*

Old Rivers (Furukawa Mfg. Co.), 1415 Higashi, Onomichi, 722 Hiroshima, Japan. *Circle No. 252.*

Raque Food Systems, Inc., 11002 Decimal Dr., Box 99416, Louisville, Ky. 40299. *Circle No. 253.*

Hi-Speed Checkweigher Co., Inc., 605 W. State St., Ithaca, N.Y. 14850. *Circle No. 254.*

Stork Food Machinery, Inc., Airport Pkwy., Box 1258, Gainesville, Ga. 30503. *Circle No. 255.*

Adco Mfg., 2170 Academy, Sanger, Calif. 93657. *Circle No. 256.*

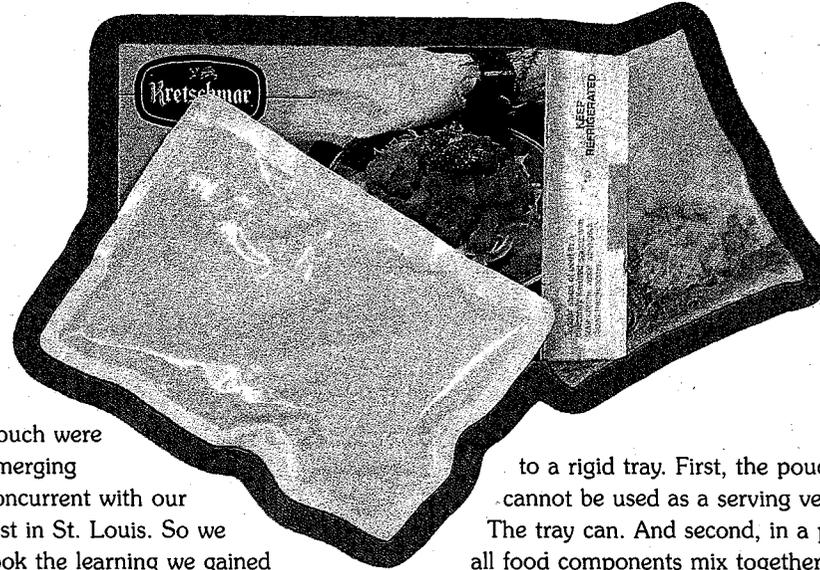
What happened to Kretschmar?

My Own Meals' all-plastic retort pouch had a forerunner of sorts in a Magic Pantry product market-tested in St. Louis under the Kretschmar brand (see PD, June '86, p. 88). Had the pouch been successful in its test, Hamilton, Ont.-based Magic Pantry planned to expand distribution throughout the U.S. and into Canada as well. That plan has been scrapped, however, as Magic Pantry now markets its all-plastic retort pouch only in limited quantities, and not under the Kretschmar brand, in Canada.

"The all-plastic pouch was a nice leap forward from a foil-containing pouch because it permitted microwaving," says Magic Pantry president Mark de Naray. "But newer packaging technologies superior to the

pouch were emerging concurrent with our test in St. Louis. So we took the learning we gained from the pouch and incorporated it in a new line of eight trayed products that we now are introducing."

De Naray points to two disadvantages of the pouch compared



to a rigid tray. First, the pouch cannot be used as a serving vessel. The tray can. And second, in a pouch all food components mix together, which is fine for something like chili or a Salisbury steak with gravy. But if a food marketer wants to package, say, a meat item with mashed potatoes and a vegetable, the tray can be molded with

compartments that will keep the different food items, with their very different textures, apart. A pouch, says de Naray, doesn't permit this.

Magic Pantry's line of eight shelf-stable meals in all-plastic retortable trays are scheduled for shipment at the end of July. They'll be tested initially in Phoenix, Denver and Indianapolis.

That's not to say that Magic Pantry has lost interest in marketing retort pouches at retail. It continues to do so and in sizable volumes. But the vast majority of them are packaged in laminates that include foil, currently a less costly approach than the use of an all-plastic pouch. The way de Naray sees it, if true convenience is an objective, an all-plastic tray is the answer, not a pouch.