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What's for dinner Mom?

Scaled-down dinners are latest food fad for kids



By Peter Healy
Staff Writer

For those with no time to cook, there's Le Menu, Budget Gourmet, frozen dinners and a host of other alternatives.

But what convenience foods are there in kid-sized portions to suit kids' tastes?

A Chicago-area mother of two, Mary Anne Jackson, responded to that gap in the prepared foods market. The former Stamford resident created microwaveable meals for kids — sort of a pre-teen cuisine called My Own Meals.

The chicken, turkey and pork-based meals are currently sold in supermarkets in the Chicago region but can be shipped to anywhere in the United States from the company's base in Deerfield, Ill. The meals are expected to be in the metropolitan New York area in another year.

"What we're trying to do is give an option to mothers for a home-cooked meal for their kids, that they don't have time to prepare," Jackson said in a telephone interview from Deerfield, where she lives with her husband, Joseph D'Onofrio, daughter Katie, 3½, and 1-year-old son Joey.

Jackson, 35, knew that most working and single parents no longer have the time or the patience to prepare big, sit-down meals like her own mother made when her family lived in a stately 19-room house on Newfield Avenue during the 1970s.

When Jackson's own daughter was born, Jackson held a management position at the Chicago-based Beatrice Cos., makers of La Choy, Tropicana and other food products, and didn't have time to cook extensively.

"When I went back to work after my daughter Katie was born I used to make all of her meals in individual cartons and freeze each one," said Jackson, whose baby-sitter would serve the meals. "I wanted to be sure of what my daughter was eating and that it was good, healthy food. So I would prepare it on weekends and set up a menu for the rest of the week."

Impressed with her technique, Jackson's friends asked her to help them prepare meals for their children.

An idea for a new company was planted and it really sprouted when Jackson was laid off in a 1986 buyout of Beatrice.

"I figured that I would turn this situation into an opportunity by using the time to start my own business, something I always wanted to do," said Jackson, who had been an accountant with Price Waterhouse & Co. in Stamford.

Nearly two years had passed since the company started in 1986 and the first meals debuted on supermarket shelves in April of this year. Jackson used the time to survey her market, send questionnaires to parents of potential customers in Chicago and suburbs and develop a product line.

The original 24 ideas were whittled down to five meals — half-pint combinations of

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chicken, turkey, pork, vegetables, potatoes, rice and pasta. They are pre-cooked and have a shelf life of one year because their vacuum sealed plastic pouches let in no air or moisture.

Their names, "Chicken, Please," "My Kind of Chicken," "My Meatballs and Shells," "My Turkey Meatballs" and "My Favorite Pasta," are meant to appeal to youngsters. They range from \$2.39 retail for "My Favorite Pasta" to \$2.99 for the chicken dinners.

"We went through hundreds of names to come up with these names," said Jackson, a University of Connecticut graduate. "Children are possessive, they say everything is 'mine.' We wanted to give them the feeling that this meal was all their own."

Do her own children use the product? "Katie's eaten it twice this week so far," Jackson said one Friday last month. Jackson herself eats every 2,000th meal the company produces, to test for quality.

As mothers suggested after surveys and taste tests, the meals have no preservatives or monosodium glutamate (MSG) and re-

quire no refrigeration. "We tried to stay away from salts, sugars and any other chemical additives," Jackson said. For example, when taste tests indicated that children would prefer sweeter sauce in "My Meatballs and Shells," ground raisins were added instead of processed sugar.

Directions are in English and Spanish. Dinners can be boiled in their vacuum sealed plastic pouches in 4 minutes or cooked in a microwave oven in 1 1/2 minutes. In a pinch, such as on a vacation, the dinners can be placed under hot water until they are warm enough to eat, Jackson said.

There has been little time for Jackson to take vacations since she started the business. She frequently travels to Mullins, S.C., to a manufacturer that contracted with her company to put the meals together. Then she has to look for new places to expand the sale of her wares and raise capital (about \$850,000 so far from independent investors).

Since the product became available, a media blitz has begun and Jackson spends much of her work day giving interviews.

"We just sent out 50 press kits," she said proudly. "I'll be in American Health (magazine) in November." Other stories about My Own Meals are scheduled to go in Business Week and Venture, a magazine for entrepreneurs. Jackson's picture was on the September cover of Inc., a magazine about growing companies. Other briefs, blurbs and stories have appeared in The Wall Street Journal and numerous trade publications. The company she founded was also featured on NBC's "Today" show in September and a TV ad campaign is planned.

"That's great. I'm so excited," she said of the prospects of publicity on the East Coast, a step toward selling the meals in markets

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Here is the nutritional information for one of the "My Own Meal" selections called "My Kind of Chicken". It consists of chunks of chicken with vegetables and brown rice in sauce.

Child's serving size	Age 1-3		Age 4-10	
	4 oz. (114g)		8 oz. (227g)	
Servings per pouch	2		1	
Calories	110		220	
Protein	11g		21g	
Carbohydrates	9g		17g	
Fat	4g		7g	
Cholesterol	28mg		57mg	
Sodium	290mg		590mg	
Fiber	1.4g		2.8g	

Servings per pouch	R.D.A. for each age grouping		
	1-3 Yrs.	4-6 Yrs.	7-10 Yrs.
Protein	46%	71%	62%
Vitamin A	*	*	*
Vitamin C	*	*	*
Thiamine (B1)	1	3	2
Riboflavin (B2)	14	23	16
Niacin	30	49	33
Calcium	1	3	3
Iron	3	10	10

INGREDIENTS: Water, chicken meat, brown rice, carrots, butter, peas, celery, chicken base (chicken meat including natural chicken juices, salt, maltodextrin, chicken fat, sugar, dried whey, flavoring, turmeric), cornstarch, natural flavoring, milk, onion powder, spices.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Former Stamford resident Mary Anne Jackson stocks the shelves of the Village Market in Deerfield, Ill., where her company, My Own Meals, is based.

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nationwide. Right now, My Own Meals are sold in metropolitan Chicago and parts of Indiana and Wisconsin.

"We will be in Stamford and we will be in New York," Jackson said. "It will be coming within a year or so."

The large number of working parents in lower Fairfield County would make her product more marketable, said Jackson.

She has a way to go, as her company — like its customers — is in its formative years. About \$60,000 worth of meals have been sold in six months. Long-term sales

projections call for a half-million dollars in sales in 1988, \$10 million next year and in \$60 million in 1989.

The product can be obtained by writing to:

My Own Meals Inc., P.O. Box 334, 400 Lake Cook Road Suite 107, Deerfield, Ill., 60015.