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Inside Today's Journal

THE AMERICAN WAY OF BUYING

A Wall Street Journal Centennial Survey

The series begins today on page B1. Stories include:

- Impact of the microwave on family life

The Microwave Cooks Up a New Way of Life

IT HAS BECOME the hearth of Americans' daily lives. In subtle and far-reaching ways, it has changed perceptions of family, fastness and even food itself. It is that unsung icon of the '80s, the microwave.

In a sign of the times, Wall Street Journal survey participants said the microwave was their favorite household product. They rated it second in importance to their lives, just behind the smoke alarm.

For women, the no-fuss, no-muss appliance offers the perfect way to flee the kitchen without feeling much guilt. The microwave is also the embodiment of '80s-style individualism, turning each family member into a private chef. Gone is the sanctity of the family meal. Irretrievably altered is the role of mom, the nurturer.

"The mother who was tied to the kitchen as either the cook or the maid for her family has become merely the manager of the food supply," says Richard Nelson, director of market research services at Campbell Soup Co. Kids as young as six are zapping child-oriented product lines like Kid's Kitchen, Kid Cuisine and My Own Meals.

Most of all, the microwave is both symptom and symbol of our radically altered attitudes about time. It's no coincidence that during the '80s—the decade in which time has come to rival money as the commodity people crave most—the appliance moved from the realm of the novel to the necessary. The invention was available to consumers in the '60s, but they stayed away because of high prices and fears about cooking quality and radiation leakage. By 1980, only about 15% of all American households had microwaves. Today, that figure is between 75% and 80%.

If the appliance satisfies people's com-

pulsion to hoard time, it has also transformed their sense of how fast is fast. "Microwaves have changed our perceptions of time in the '80s much as telephones changed them at the turn of the century," says Mona Doyle, president of Consumer Network Inc., a consumer research firm in Philadelphia. "It has made even fast-food restaurants not seem fast because at home you don't have to wait on line."

Food manufacturers have gotten the message. They say they dare not require cooks to spend more than 10 minutes microwaving a meal these days. That's particularly startling when one considers that most cooks were willing to devote 30 minutes to meal preparation a scant 10 years ago and about an hour in the early '70s.

Accordingly, Campbell Soup is testing a microwave soup line for all the people who find it too taxing to open a can and pour the contents into a pot. And RJR Nabisco Inc. just made a microwavable version of S'Mores, the campfire classic.

Joel Weiner, senior vice president of marketing at Philip Morris Cos.' Kraft USA, credits the microwave with enabling people to progress beyond the "grazing" phenomenon of the early '80s to "refueling"—an even less leisurely approach to shoveling food into their mouths.

But even Mr. Weiner is loath to argue that the heat-and-eat microwave has done much for American cuisine's image.

"We're just not as critical of food as we used to be," he admits.

Indeed, food industry research shows that 36% of consumers blame the microwave for poorer food flavor, 20% say it makes items soggy and 15% say it consistently overcooks products. But the urge to bake or broil seemingly vanishes when people are faced with a machine that provides so much freedom and demands so little brain-

power.

Such is the microwave's power that it has even resurrected items that seemed destined for obscurity. For instance, Kraft two years ago decided to transform its venerable-but-much-derided

Cheez Whiz spread into a microwavable hot cheese sauce, ideal for nacho-crunching teen-agers. Sales of the slow-growth item soared 40% annually.

Ultimately, the microwave seems destined to reinvent the eating experience. Consider that lunch staple, the grilled cheese sandwich. When microwaved, the soggy sandwich doesn't remotely resemble the golden brown delectable that most Americans grew up on. But the newfangled version is the gold standard for '80s kids.

"We are redefining culturally how we think of food," Campbell's Mr. Nelson says. "Kids today are being 'imprinted' with the microwave, not the stove. By the time they grow up and have kids, it will be the primary cooking appliance."

—Alix M. Freedman

