

Return of the...

## Retort Pouch

*Shelf-stable entrees in retort pouches for children meet need of working mothers and offer microwaveability.*

Reheatable entrees in the retort pouch replaced canned C-rations for military combat meals starting back in 1979, but several attempts to spin-off retort pouch technology to the consumer market—notably by Kraft with its *a la Carte* line of shelf-stable entrees—failed in the early '80s.

Major reason: The original foil-layered retort pouch “contributed no significant benefit to consumers,” said Mary Anne Jackson, founder and president of My Own Meals, Inc. (Deerfield, IL), at the *MW Markets '88* conference conducted by The Packaging Group, Inc. December 14-15 in Chicago. “A la Carte could not be microwaved in the pouch,” Jackson added. “This put [it] at a competitive disadvantage with frozen microwave entrees.”

Jackson, a former executive and leveraged buyout casualty at Beatrice Foods as well as mother of two, started her own firm in 1987 with a line of shelf-stable meals formulated specifically for children and packaged in a boilable or microwaveable plastic retort pouch. (Jackson was featured as the cover story in the September 1988 edition of *Inc.*, the magazine for entrepreneurs, and as having developed one of the “100 Best Ideas Of The Year” in the November issue of *Venture*.)

Jackson indicates there are further reasons for the failure of *a la Carte*, including:

- **Consumer confusion.** As the first cartoned shelf-stable heat-and-



**My Own Meals, shelf-stable entrees formulated specifically for children, are packaged in microwaveable and boilable plastic retort pouches. Five varieties are currently available.**

serve entree, *a la Carte* was merchandised on supermarket grocery shelves with dry entrees such as macaroni and cheese yet was packaged like a frozen entree, leading many consumers to believe that it was a frozen product erroneously stocked by inexperienced grocery clerks and therefore unsafe.

- **Competition from frozen entrees.** “Many new frozen items were hitting the market which could be microwaved or boiled in a pouch, or were dual-ovenable,” said Jackson.

- **Original packaging graphics,** intended to illustrate high-quality ingredients including fresh raw meat and vegetables but which also conveyed the impression that the product should be frozen or refrigerated. (Kraft later changed the graphics on the package.)

- **Unlike frozen entrees,** a *la Carte* at first had no rice or pasta component. A flow-through bag of pasta or rice was later added, but “even if consumers opened the pouch, put the meal on a plate and then microwaved it, they still had to boil the pasta.”

The next major development in the history of the retort pouch occurred in Canada in 1986 when Kretschmar Brands tested entrees packaged in a plastic retort pouch supplied by Ludlow (since acquired by American National Can Co.), Jackson continued. These products had a one-year shelf life but were sold as refrigerated products to help position them in the marketplace. Although they were microwaveable in the pouch, consumers didn't perceive any advantage over frozen entrees and “with a year's shelf-

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# FOOD PACKAGING

## Mom creates MOM

Jackson's idea for My Own Meals (acronym MOM) emerged from her own experience as a working mother. After her daughter was born and she returned to her career at Beatrice, she was concerned about her daughter's nutrition and spent weekends preparing meals for the babysitter to serve her daughter during the week. "As my daughter became older it became more and more difficult to prepare these weekend menus," said Jackson. "She wanted more adult-oriented but specially-flavored meals. All I could do was grit my teeth and say 'Why can't someone do this for me? Why can't there be good, nutritious, complete, convenient meals portion-sized and flavored with a child in mind?' I found out that I wasn't alone. Every mother I knew...needed the same thing."

My Own Meals are packed for Jackson's firm by So-Pak-Co (Mullins, SC),

a pioneer in retort-pouch technology as one of the first three contractors selected by the Department of Defense to produce MRE (Meal, Ready-To-Eat) combat rations back in 1979. My Own Meals are currently available in five varieties with more under development, said Jackson. Current lineup:

- "My Kind Of Chicken": Chunks of chicken with peas, carrots and brown rice in sauce.

- "Chicken, Please": Chunks of potatoes and chicken with corn and carrots in sauce.

- "My Turkey Meatballs": Turkey meatballs, Kluski noodles, peas and carrots in sauce.

- "My Meatballs & Shells": Lean beef meatballs with raisin bits and shell macaroni in tomato sauce.

- "My Favorite Pasta": Barley, macaroni, lentils and ground pork in tomato sauce.

Outer cartons are labeled "No Re-

frigeration Needed—No Preservatives Added—NO MSG" and as "boilable and microwaveable." My Own Meals are low in sugar and salt and are formulated to the nutritional needs of children. "There's lots of meat in the entrees," Jackson points out.

My Own Meals are currently carried by Dominick's and Jewel, the two major supermarket chains serving the Chicago market, as well as by upscale Chicago independents such as Treasure Island plus wholesalers and retailers serving Southern Wisconsin and Northern Indiana.

For further information concerning the plastic retort pouch contact: American National Can Co., American Lane, Greenwich, CT 06836-3610, or circle 267 on the reader service card. Complete proceedings of the *MW Markets '88* conference are available from: The Packaging Group, Inc., P.O. Box 345, Milltown, N.J. 08850.