

MOM girds for battle

Deerfield exec fills a niche by providing quick, nutritious meals for kids

BY BETSY STORM

Dressed for success in a navy blue suit with a crisp red tie hugging the neckline of her white blouse, Mary Anne Jackson looks every bit the quintessential MBA. The outward image is matched by an impressive resume, dominated by a long stint with Beatrice Foods. Armed with her years in the corporate trenches, a wide competitive streak and boundless energy, Jackson is taking on the big guys. So watch out, Banquet (a division of ConAgra Frozen Foods). And Tyson and Hormel—look over your shoulders.

Mary Anne Jackson is founder and president of Deerfield-based My Own Meals (MOM). Aimed at the 2- to 10-year-old set, My Own Meals is a line of five all-natural prepared meals created with nutritional basics in mind. After intensive research and product development, Jackson introduced My Own Meals in August 1988.

She has had the kids' entree market to herself for almost two years and doesn't appear to be overly concerned about the recent appearance of Banquet Foods' "Kids' Cuisine," Tyson's new "Looney Tunes Meals" or Hormel's "Kids's Kitchen." In fact, Jackson is gearing up for head-to-head competition from these food industry leaders.

Like most new product success stories, My Own Meals followed a classic marketing tenet: Find a need in the marketplace and fill it. Simple as that doctrine is, the concept of developing high quality, convenient meals for youngsters didn't come to Jackson in a brainstorming session. Rather, it evolved from her own hectic life as a high-powered executive with a young daughter at home.

Jackson's position with Beatrice Foods (recently acquired by KKR in a leveraged buyout) from 1978 to 1986 demanded intense hours and a suitcase that was always packed. Despite her schedule, Jackson spent almost every Sunday night in the kitchen of

her Deerfield home preparing a stock of home-cooked meals to nourish her 2-year-old, Katie, while Jackson tended to Beatrice business. "I wanted to make sure the babysitters would feed her good, decent food," says Jackson, sounding like the working mothers to whom she caters.

In 1986 Jackson was "bounced" (to use her word) from Beatrice, a fallout of office politics and the leveraged buyout. Torn between job offers and other career paths, Jackson responded to husband Joe's advice: "He told me to take the opportunity to decide what I really wanted to do," Jackson remembers fondly. "I finally decided to do what I'd been complaining nobody had done—make good meals for children."

Jackson contacted her diaper service, which often included questionnaires and other handouts with their deliveries. She wanted to survey mothers about her idea. The response was overwhelming. "Some women attached pages to the survey I'd prepared. They wanted to make sure we did it right." Others asked if they could come to Jackson's home—right away—to purchase the products. "We didn't even have a product at that point," Jackson says with a laugh. "Obviously, we'd hit a nerve."

The outplacement firm where Jackson was sent after leaving Beatrice provided the unlikely first home for My Own Meals. The location turned out to be a stroke of incredible luck, too. Each of the displaced executives occupied a small "office" with a table and telephone. While struggling to refuel their careers, many of these seasoned experts pitched in on the early MOM research. "A wonderful advertising pro helped me design my first survey, and a top production expert helped me judge a potential manufacturing facility," Jackson recalls. "I was able to take all this wonderful experience and use it."

Jackson's preliminary research indicated mothers didn't want any MSG,

preservatives or anything artificial in the meals. Moms also wanted the offerings to be shelf-stable (no refrigeration required) and come in a microwaveable/boilable pouch. With tabulations and mothers' pleas in hand, Jackson took a major step. She invested \$32,000 of her own money to hire a food development firm. (Far more funds have since been raised.)

Working within her own nutritional guidelines, she and the team finally decided on five entrees that were most practical from a food processing standpoint: "Chicken Please," light and dark chicken chunks with potatoes, corn and carrots; "My Kind of Chicken," chicken chunks, brown rice flavored with a light broth, carrots and peas; "My Meatballs & Shells," beef meatballs and pasta shells in tomato sauce; "My Turkey Meatballs," and "My Favorite Pasta," macaroni with ground pork, barley and lentils in tomato sauce.

Jackson says My Own Meals are far superior to the competition, and two recently published articles support her assertion. USA Today recently served up the offerings of four manufacturers to a panel of children and reported on their critiques; MOM's "Chicken Please" was the biggest palate-pleaser. The small portions and nutritional value of the entrees also appeal to many elderly people, Jackson reports. And My Own Meals is the only company making kids' meals that wins the approval of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer watchdog group that monitors nutritional concerns.

As My Own Meals continues to expand its reach—it's now available in 10 states—Mary Anne Jackson will be as busy as ever. She's away 50 percent of the time. Need we mention that her daughter and son, Joey, enjoy the fruits of MOM's labor on a regular basis? And as for Jackson, "I eat them all the time for lunch," she insists, "that way I don't have to leave the office."