

Small fry microwave meals become big business

By Arlene Vigoda
USA TODAY

Microwave meals for kids on the go are heating up the frozen food market.

Companies are serving up traditional favorites — pizza, chicken nuggets and burgers — in frozen and shelf-stable varieties they say are nutritious and easy for busy parents to prepare.

"Kids' microwavable meals is the hottest new category in food products this year," says Lynn Dornblaser, publisher of *Gorman's New Product News*. "They're all doing very well and the concept of dinners designed just for children has real staying power."

Steven C. Anderson, president of the American Frozen Food Institute, McLean, Va., says, "Kids encourage and influence their parents as to what kinds of food to buy so it's in everybody's best interest to appeal to children's tastes."

With zap-it food sales of all types topping \$2 billion, manufacturers want a bite of the ever-growing market. And they're hoping the USA's estimated 30 million 6- to 14-year-olds will bite back to the tune of \$250 million to \$300 million in new business.

New entrants for the small fry:

► **My Own Meals, Inc.** Five preservative- and additive-free shelf-stable entrees (two new ones are due this summer) for ages 2 to 8. Choices include chicken with brown rice and vegetables, pasta with lentils and meatballs with shells and raisins.

"We've added nutritious ingredients to give parents safe and healthy alternatives," says company vice president Beth Martin.

Package directions specify that the meal would be prepared by adults. "We don't have the right to tell parents when their kids are old enough to use the microwave."

Available in supermarkets, Toys R Us and by mail order; \$1.99-\$2.49.

► **Kid's Kitchen.** Hormel's fast-food entrees are shelf-stable and can be stored unrefrigerated for up to 18 months. Dinners include chicken chow mein, beef ravioli in tomato sauce and macaroni and cheese. For ages 3 to 13.

The package also includes an official membership card in the Kid's Kitchen Club and a Kidalogue, a catalog through which they can purchase games, toys and sporting goods with money and proof-of-purchase combinations.

Kids weigh in their opinions

Who better to assess microwave meals for kids than kids themselves?

We invited six young experts to taste-test a best-selling entree from each of four manufacturers. Here is what they told USA TODAY reporter Arlene Vigoda and researcher Donna Gable.

Looney Tunes: Macaroni and Cheese. Noodles and cheddar cheese; applesauce; green beans with butter sauce; Looney Tunes trading cards. Applesauce stole the show.

Aaron: It looked OK, but the flavor of the cheese was too creamy. The applesauce tasted like fruit punch which is good and the green beans tasted like there were gallons of salt in them. I'd want my parents to buy it maybe as a spare meal, like if Mom can't cook anything.

Kimberly: The macaroni smelled good. The (pink) applesauce looked funny but it tasted like Fruit Roll-Ups and that was good.

Casey: I like this and the (cards) are great.

Justin: The applesauce looked exciting because it was something new. I never tasted red applesauce before. The noodles were perfect.

Mary: The whole dinner actually was quite good. The taste was very creamy, beans were soft and the applesauce was great.

Josh: Yep, this smells great. (After another deep sniff...) "Well, now that I'm putting my nose down in it, it doesn't smell all that great." It tastes very nutritious because it has noodles, my favorite thing.

Kid's Kitchen: Beef Ravioli. Beef ravioli with tomato sauce. A weak contender.

Aaron: The beef was really bitter. The noodles were good, but by itself it would not be filling enough. I'd never want to eat this one again.

Kimberly: It looked slimy, because when I first saw it, I didn't hear what the name was called and all I saw was red stuff on top. I did not like it. No way would I want my parents to buy it.

Casey: I thought it looked neat. I could taste the beef and smell it, too. It didn't really smell like spaghetti, though.

Justin: This was my favorite — the smell was bumpin', the taste was bumpin', everything about it was bumpin'. That means I love it. It was great and filling like ravioli should be.

Mary: It was better than SpaghettiOs because it has more meat in it.

Josh: Not too bad. Can I have some more macaroni and cheese?

Available in Indianapolis, Denver and Phoenix, there are no immediate plans for national distribution; \$1.19-\$1.39.

► **Looney Tunes.** Tyson Foods' entry into the kids' food market includes Yosemite Sam barbecued chicken; Bugs Bunny chicken chunks; and Daffy Duck spaghetti and meatballs. Geared to kids 4 through 10, the meals come with heat-resistant handles to minimize accidental burns.

"Safety and nutrition are the two main concerns for us," says Joni Rutherford, Looney Tunes' product manager. Price: \$2.49.

► **Kid Cuisine.** Banquet's line of eight frozen dinners boasts "no artificial colors or flavors" on its boxes and consists of an entree, two side dishes and dessert.

Choices include: chicken nuggets with french fries, applesauce and a brownie; pizza, green beans and raisins; and fried chicken, mashed potatoes, corn and peanut butter cookie.

Suggested for ages 3 to 10, each package comes with Fun-Pak kits that include stickers, games and puzzles to amuse tykes while they wait for dinner. Price: \$1.89.



Photos by Anne Ryan, USA TODAY
KIDS' WORK: Casey Powers, 9, left, and Justin Hillian, 9, both of Clinton, Md., give children's meals the taste test.



JOSH SHAPIRO: 5-year-old from Arlington, Va., favors the macaroni meal.



KIMBERLY GREEN: The Washington, D.C., 8-year-old likes chicken the most.



A MATTER OF TASTE: Aaron Shapiro, 9, left, and Mary Ubbens, 9, of Arlington, Va., put their palates to work.

My Own Meal: My Kind of Chicken.

Chicken with rice, gravy, carrots, potatoes and corn mixed in. The biggest vote getter; a favorite for three taste testers.

Aaron: I like the gravy and rice; the chicken was a little dry. I was a little disappointed because everybody got cut-up carrots in their chicken and there was none in mine. I wonder why. The only thing I would say is that if there were crackers with this, it would be a complete meal.

Kimberly: It didn't have a specific smell, but I don't know what chicken smells like. With all the gravy, it tasted tangy. It didn't really look yummy, but it made me think it would smell good.

Casey: I can't say anything bad about it; it was wonderful. I'm a gravy-and-rice man.

Justin: It tasted better than I expected. It looked like it would taste bad at first because everything was mashed together. It tasted like rice and you could taste the chicken and the carrots, too.

Mary: It didn't look right, but I heard Aaron say he liked it so I tried to like it a whole lot. It tasted great, but I could've had more.

Josh: The chicken tasted salty — like salad — so I don't want my parents to buy it. Can I have some more macaroni and cheese?

Kid Cuisine: Cheese Pizza. A square of cheese pizza; applesauce; green beans and a box of raisins. The raisins were the only hit.

Aaron: The crust looked too breadly and hard to cut. The cheese was too thin and salty and the green beans were too tough to chew. The applesauce was good. I like it warm. I just didn't find the pizza that flavorful. But I loved the raisins. After I ate them, I showed everyone how to turn their empty box into a whistle.

Kimberly: Everything looked perfect but then I tasted it. The green beans tasted like they were just plain old beans, not like they were cooked. The applesauce smelled like hot oranges but tasted like hot applesauce.

Casey: It wasn't bad but I like any kind of pizza. My dad overheated the applesauce and I hate hot applesauce.

Justin: It sure wasn't as good as Pizza Hut. The green beans didn't taste right — they were hard and terrible.

Mary: The applesauce looked normal except for the brown things (cinnamon) in it. The beans were tough and the pizza crust was tough. If you took the beans off and gave me broccoli, that would be better.

Josh: I liked the pizza but it chewed hard. The beans tasted like raw vegetables. I liked the applesauce hot. I wouldn't want my mom to buy it. I'd rather have macaroni.

Parents deliver their verdicts

Our taste-testers' parents judged product nutrition, convenience and safety.

► They liked Kid Cuisine pizza more than the kids.

"A well-balanced meal with low calories and no preservatives," says Kimberly's mom, Karen Green.

Robert Powers, Casey's dad, says it would be a fine snack, "but not filling enough for dinner."

► High sodium in Looney Tunes' macaroni and cheese (630 milligrams) bothered all the parents.

"I'd only use the meal in a crunch," says Pat Shapiro, Aaron and Josh's mom.

Salt adds taste, "but we've tried to keep it as low as possible," says Joni Rutherford of Looney Tunes.

► The Kid's Kitchen package supplied by Hormel lacked nutritional labeling. However, product manager Bill Bernardo says packages in stores today have "everything on it."

► Everyone liked My Own Meals' chicken best. "It looked nutritious and home-cooked and was nicely seasoned," says Green.

They considered all but one product safe and easy. The plastic lid on the Kid's Kitchen beef ravioli is hard to open; the pull-ring could cut small fingers. "I wouldn't let Justin take the top off himself. It could be dangerous," says Dennis Hillian.

"It would be dangerous for kids under 12," says Betty Ubbens, Mary's mother.

The company, says Bernardo, is "very close to reformulating the packaging to make it safer."

Nutrition content not the greatest

A microwave meal once or twice every few weeks won't harm a kid, but these shouldn't be a nearly nightly feature, nutritionists say.

We asked dietitians Pat Moriarty, of Alexandria, Va., and Jane Hurley, of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, to evaluate the meals.

Moriarty's general misgivings: The meals are often low in nutrients and very high in sodium and fat. Half of Kid Cuisine meals get more than 40 percent of their calories from fat. The American

Academy of Pediatrics recommends that not more than 30 percent to 40 percent of calories come from fat.

Hurley came down hard on Kid Cuisine's high fat and salt content. "Such meals set the stage for kids to end up with health problems like high blood pressure and obesity," she says. "All but two of their meals have more than 600 milligrams of salt and two hit 1000."

There are no recommended guidelines on salt for children, but the National Academy of Sciences suggests no

more than 2400 milligrams a day for adults.

Counters Susan Hanley, of Kid Cuisine: "Parents don't have to pick the ones that are high in fat. But kids like it and it's healthier than fast food. ... It should be used as an occasional treat."

The brands vary widely in minerals and nutrients. Highest ranking: My Own Meals' tomato-sauce pasta with 81 percent of a child's needs for vitamin A.

Looney Tunes macaroni and cheese is a good source of calcium, Moriarty says.