

July 1991

Complimentary take home issue

# Continental

## Profiles

### **HOT MEALS**

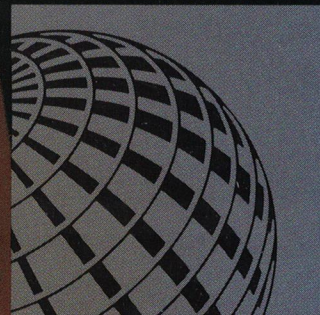
Mary Anne Jackson is satisfying an appetite for easy-to-prepare children's dishes

### **SOVIET UNIONS**

Larry Namer has found a new market for old movies back in the U.S.S.R.

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Jackson keeps working parents and their children smiling with her shelf-stable meals.



# Hot Meals

*Mary Anne Jackson is satisfying an appetite for easy-to-prepare children's meals.*

At the height of the war in the Persian Gulf, Mary Anne Jackson didn't bat an eye when the Defense Department contacted her about a potential contract to ship supplies to Saudi Arabia. After all, she had already arranged to send her first shipment of goods to the country through an independent broker.

An arms dealer? Hardly. Jackson is a food developer and marketer, who peddles shelf-stable, all natural, microwavable children's meals to working parents. As president and founder of My Own Meals, Inc., in Deerfield, Illinois, Jackson is fighting for shelf space in grocery stores, attempting to capture a solid share of the growing packaged and frozen food market targeted to children ages two and up.

My Own Meals are distributed nationally through military commissaries and through several grocery store chains in 18 states, primarily in the Midwest, on the East Coast, and in California. The company recently started shipping the packaged meals to U.S. embassies overseas. In addition, the meals are scheduled to be shipped to the Middle East, based on advice from a food broker who convinced Jackson that My Own Meals would sell to Western and European families living in Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, her meals had already been tested by U.S. Army Natick (continued on page 41)

*By Echo Montgomery Garrett*



KEVIN O. MOONEY



(continued from page 27)

Natick laboratories, who were looking for alternatives to the less-than-inspiring rations troops in the field were getting. But the war ended before a contract was inked.

What the U.S. military saw in Jackson's meals is what many concerned parents see: high protein products that are easy to prepare and have enough variety to keep eaters from getting bored. Her product line currently includes seven meals: Chicken, Please; My Kind of Chicken; My Turkey Meatballs; My Meatballs and Shells; My Favorite Pasta; My Pizza Ravioli; and Pizza Pasta, Please. Each meal is a casserole comprised of meat and vegeta-

bles, and potatoes, rice, or noodles. They have from 220 to 260 calories of solid protein and carbohydrates.

My Own Meals, which are typi-

*Today, more than 1,000 stores throughout the country carry My Own Meals, including Grand Union, Safeway, and King Cullen.*

cally sold in the canned goods area of grocery stores, are processed in the same fashion as cans of chicken soup or cans of chili. But they are stored in special vacuum-sealed

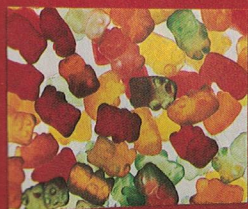
plastic pouches instead of tin cans. By keeping her overhead low, Jackson has been able to price her meals slightly below almost all of her competitors' products. Her products' retail prices range from \$1.99 to \$2.49; theirs range from \$2.29 to \$2.89.

Jackson's meals also travel well. They can be popped into a diaper bag or lunch pail when a child heads off to day care or Grandma's house with no need for freezing or refrigeration. When a child is ready to eat, the pouch can be zapped in 90 seconds or boiled in water for a few minutes. They are shelf stable for about one year.

My Own Meals first appeared in grocery stores in the United States

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in 1988. Two years later, some of the biggest names in the food business—ConAgra Frozen Foods, Tyson Foods, Geo. A. Hormel & Co., and Kraft—debuted their own entries in the projected \$500-million children's food market.

**B**ut Jackson, a petite 38-year-old mother of two, wasn't afraid of a battle, at least not on the food front. In fact, she declared war against some of her competitors in January 1990, when they started advertising that their meals were safe for children as young as age five to microwave unsupervised. Jackson immediately took the offensive, banging out press releases to the media countering their advice.

She also enlisted the Shriners Burn Institute, a treatment hospital for children, as an expert witness against what she declared to be a

*Jackson expects to sell \$4 million worth of her product in 1991.*

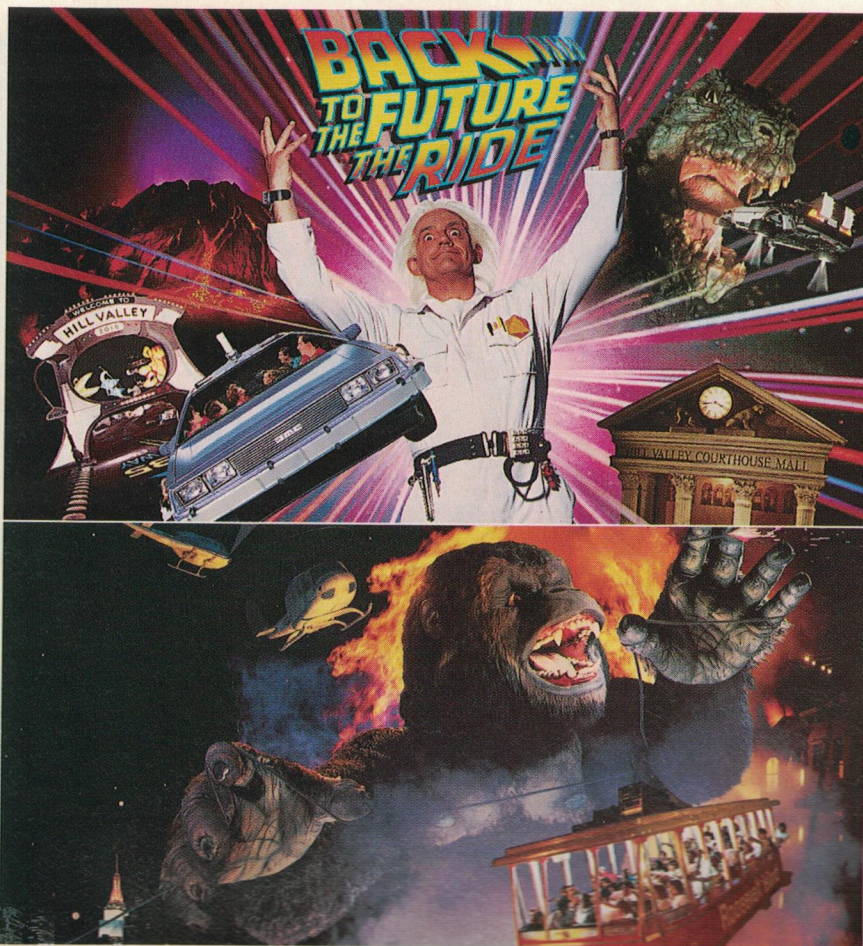
danger to youngsters. The risk of children spilling hot food and badly burning themselves was too great, explains Jackson.

Apparently, Jackson's safety campaign was successful. "I watched commercials being pulled, and it forced the offending parties to com-

pletely change their packaging and advertising materials," she says.

Though she may be tough on her competitors, she was nonetheless glad to see them enter the market. "When I saw them coming in I was so happy, because that meant we had hit a nerve," says Jackson, who began laying the groundwork for her company five years ago. "When they start coming in, it means you're doing something right."

Jackson is undaunted by the size of her competitors. After all, she is no stranger to the corporate world. As a certified public accountant with an M.B.A., she cut her teeth at two Big Eight accounting firms. Then she spent eight years at Beatrice Cos. — first as head of strategic



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planning and later as head of operations planning—before she got lost in the shuffle of a corporate takeover.

But Jackson deliberately chose the shelf-stable market rather than the frozen food market because the latter was already overcrowded. Food companies were slugging it out in the children's food segment, armed with multimillion dollar television advertising campaigns on Saturday mornings. Her decision to go with shelf-stable kept her above the fracas in the frozen food section.

"Parents are looking for nutritionally balanced products that kids will eat, as opposed to products built around cartoon characters," observes Philip Lempert, the editor of

*The Lempert Report*, a bi-weekly marketing trend newsletter. "I think the market will eventually move away from frozen food because it's over-

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*According to a USA Today taste test, My Own Meals ranked number one with both parents and children.*

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stocked with mediocre product."

Jackson further differentiated her product line from her competitors by leaving out preservatives and using only natural ingredients, which the U.S.D.A. has cleared her to advertise on her packaging. Besides nutri-

tional labeling, the packaging also includes suggestions for how parents can complement the meals with other side dishes, desserts, or drinks. The suggestions come from nutritionist Mary Abbott-Hess, the current president of the American Dietetics Association.

"With today's moms and dads so hassled it helps for someone to give you advice," says Jackson, "so you know if one meal needs milk or juice or a piece of cheese and a graham cracker to get the right calories and calcium levels."

"People today are smart, and a lot of the big food companies aren't recognizing that the consumers are as smart as they are," adds Jackson. "Consumers are getting better at

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reading labels." And they like what they are reading—at least on Jackson's packages.

"My Own Meals are parents directed and kid friendly," says Tim Dorgan, president and chief operations officer of Noble & Associates, a Chicago advertising company specializing in food. A father of four boys ages two to ten, Dorgan adds, "The old days when you could give a kid a pot pie or a TV dinner on a tin tray are gone."

**T**oday what kids think counts, too. And that's good news for Jackson. Last year, *USA Today* conducted a taste test squaring off My Own Meals against Looney Tunes, Kid's Kitchen, and Kid's

Cuisine. My Own Meals ranked number one with both parents and children (ages five to nine) who voted.

Jackson first came up with the

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*Jackson is currently developing shelf-stable kosher meals for children and adults.*

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idea of My Own Meals after her daughter, Kathleen, now six, was born. She noticed that a lot of working women talked about how difficult it was to prepare nutritious meals for their children. She quickly recognized the gap.

Once the idea struck, Jackson, who had always wanted to be an entrepreneur, moved swiftly. "I got the idea in August 1986, incorporated in October, tested the concept in November, and hired the product development company in December," she recalls. "In January, I started the development process." Nonetheless, true to her background in strategic planning, Jackson carefully worked out the details of the business for 18 months before attempting to sell any product.

She worked with a nutritionist to develop recipes; initially they created 24 meals. Then she held focus groups with parents and children throughout the Midwest to hone down the number of meals. Finally



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she sought out investors, eventually raising \$2.5 million from more than 70 stockholders in private placements to develop and market her product. She also invested more

than \$150,000 out of her own pocket.

Jackson kept the start-up lean, hiring one of her former Beatrice colleagues, Elizabeth Martin, as vice

president of administration and production. She also set up an in-house advertising department. The company still operates with only eight permanent staff members, including Jackson. Though at any given time there may be as many as 300 people working for My Own Meals on a contractual basis, including sales representatives, free-lance production people, etc.

Still, getting her product on grocery store shelves was more difficult than she had anticipated. In August 1988 she sold her first grocery store chain, Dominick's, in Chicago. But it took another ten months for her to sell her second chain, Jewel Food. Today, more than 1,000 stores throughout the country carry My Own Meals, including such major chains as Grand Union, Safeway, King Cullen, and Byerly's.

Last December, in another marketing coup, the company started selling its meals in some Kinder-Care centers, a national chain of child care facilities.

Jackson, who seems to have a sixth sense for market gaps, is currently developing shelf-stable kosher meals for children and adults. She believes it is an underserved market, albeit small enough that her big-name competitors will probably leave it alone.

Not that Jackson is afraid of another food war. After all, with a target for selling \$4 million worth of her product in 1991, she has obviously already won quite a few battles. □

*Echo Montgomery Garrett, a free-lance writer based in New York City, has written for Inc., Success, and The New York Times.*

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