

Mary Anne Jackson's first idea was so good it attracted cutthroat competition from the big food companies. Then she discovered the joys of kosher cooking.

# The shiksa chef

By Suzanne Oliver



My Own Meals founder Mary Anne Jackson, with Joey and Katie  
**She found her business idea close to home.**

IN APRIL 1986 Mary Anne Jackson was fired from her job as a strategic planner at Beatrice, a victim of the big food conglomerate's leveraged buyout. The next week Jackson, then 32, went looking for a new job.

With an M.B.A. from De Paul University, earned at night during her eight-year tenure at Beatrice, plus four years' experience in public accounting, Jackson was a qualified job-seeker. United Airlines made her an offer. So did Packaging Corp. of America. But Jackson, mother of an 18-month-old daughter, decided that rather than start climbing another corporate ladder that might get taken away again anyway, she'd start a business of her own.

Yes, but what business? Like many people who start businesses, Jackson looked for ideas close to home—*very* close. As a working mother, Jackson

had spent Sunday nights cooking and freezing food for the babysitter to feed her daughter on nights that she worked late. Many working parents she knew fed their children McDonald's Happy Meals on nights they worked late and felt pretty guilty about it. Jackson figured that expiating guilt would be a powerful basis for a business, and she had some anecdotal experience to back her hunch. "Other mothers I knew had asked me for my recipes and freezing instructions," she recalls.

From her days at Beatrice, Jackson was familiar with a manufacturing process known as retort packaging, in which fresh foods are vacuum-sealed and pressure-cooked in a plastic pouch. That way the food remains shelf stable for up to a year, with no refrigeration and no preservatives. To cook the food, all a busy parent or

babysitter has to do is pop the pouch in the microwave or into a pot of boiling water.

To test her idea, Jackson and another former Beatrice executive designed a questionnaire to determine whether mothers would be interested in a shelf-stable children's meal. Her diaper service delivered the questionnaires to its 2,000 customers. Of the 300 people who responded, over 80% were for the idea.

Jackson figured the idea was worth a try. My Own Meals, Inc., of Deerfield, Ill., was born.

Jackson hired a nutritionist to review her 24 recipe ideas, then sent the recipes to a food development firm that prepared sample meals. Going back to the diaper service customers, as well as to schools, neighbors' homes and day care centers, she ran taste tests. By the fall of 1987, 18 months after getting the ax at Beatrice, she had 5 basic recipes—2 chicken and vegetable dishes, and pasta and meatballs among them.

This business was not started on a shoestring. Market research and product development alone cost \$365,000—\$65,000 of Jackson's own money and \$300,000 raised from investors, mostly friends in the food business.

A contract manufacturer in South Carolina produced Jackson's first collection of her line. Jackson personally managed to get her first meals onto supermarket and Toys "R" Us store shelves by showing store managers bundles of complimentary mail from fans of My Own Meals.

By the end of 1989, Jackson says, My Own Meals' five products were available in about 1,000 stores across the country. By this time Jackson had put up another \$160,000 of her own money and raised another \$2 million from old and new investors, much of it for advertising. But she was making headway. In 1989 My Own Meals' sales topped \$1 million, and the company came close to breaking even.

Then the roof fell in. Tyson Foods, ConAgra and Geo. A. Hormel & Co. introduced their own children's meals. Dirty tricks followed. During one week every My Own Meals product was taken off the shelves and thrown into the damaged food bins of nearly 100 Dominick's grocery



stores. One store manager identified a sales representative of a competitor as the culprit. "It's a dog's breakfast out there," laughs Donald Frey, retired chairman of Bell & Howell Co. and an investor and board member of My Own Meals.

Jackson found herself in the nightmarish position of losing shelf space at the same time as she was paying thousands of dollars to reimburse grocery stores for damaged merchandise. "We got annihilated," says Jackson.

Then came a miracle: In late 1990, Jackson got a call from a U.S. Army

large matzoh manufacturer in New York. Soloveichik agreed to supervise her production and to lend his well-known name to her meals' packaging. To finance her kosher research and production, Jackson went back to her investors for another \$600,000, some of which she used to license the Streit name. Streit has since agreed to distribute Jackson's meals, as well.

In June, Jackson's shelf-stable kosher meals—seven adult meals and three children's meals, mostly stews and pastas—will hit grocery stores in upstate New York, Miami, Chicago



Marines in Somalia eating Jackson's kosher meals  
"Every other manufacturer said no."

supply officer who wanted to know if her company could provide shelf-stable kosher rations for observant Jewish soldiers who'd been shipped over to the Middle East for Operation Desert Storm. "Every other manufacturer said no," says Jackson, who quickly said yes.

The Gulf war ended before she could get any kosher meals to the Middle East. But in the process of filling the Army order Jackson had stumbled on an unserved U.S. market of 6.5 million kosher eaters, many of whom had trouble finding kosher meals while traveling. What if they could throw one of Jackson's meals in their suitcase and heat it up at their destination?

Jackson presented her idea to Rabbi Aaron Soloveichik, who oversees kosher production for Aron Streit, a

and Los Angeles. The military, which tested her kosher meals on U.S. troops in Somalia, has agreed to buy up to 5 million meals in 1995, at an average price of about \$2.

Last year My Own Meals' sales were just under the \$1 million mark, but Jackson expects her kosher offerings to increase sales dramatically. And with the Streit brand name and distribution force behind her, Jackson, who still owns 51% of her company, now has protection on the store shelves.

What about an attack from the big food companies on her new niche? "I know the big companies," Jackson replies. "This market is too small and way too complicated to interest them." Taking no chances, she throws a pinch of kosher salt over her shoulder.

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