

# Persian Gulf War bonus: Shelf-stable kosher foods

By Lilla Ross  
Staff writer

Something wholesome came out of the Persian Gulf War — kosher food.

The military had a problem. Some of the thousands of soldiers being sent to Operation Desert Storm were observant Jews who didn't eat pork or shellfish or mix meat and dairy foods.

The Defense Department put out a call to food manufacturers: Come up with shelf-stable kosher meals.

"Everyone said no except us," said Mary Ann Jackson, founder and president of My Own Meals of Deerfield, Ill.

Of course, the war ended a month after it began and the military no longer needed to feed kosher Jews in a war zone.

But Jackson reminded the military that kosher meals would be needed in peace time, too. She

sent the military an unsolicited proposal for kosher meals, and it was accepted.

For the next four years, Jackson said she worked to produce a line of foods that was acceptable to the military and kosher Jews. It includes dishes like Chicken Mediterranean, Old World Stew, Chicken and Black Beans.

The project helped My Own Meals find a niche in the tiniest of markets in the food business. It was a good thing because Jackson's company was in trouble. She started it in 1986 to make preservative-free convenience foods for children. But faced with overwhelming competition in children's food, in 1990 Jackson knew she had to take her company in an entirely different direction.

Once the kosher line started up,

## Company makes 'multi-faith meals'

(From Page E-1)

Muslims in the military started asking for dishes to meet their dietary requirements. So My Own Meals began producing its vegetarian dishes under Muslim supervision. The military chaplains christened the dishes "multi-faith meals."

My Own Meals produces a line of ready-to-eat, shelf-stable foods that meet Jewish kosher and Muslim halal standards. Five of the dishes are vegetarian. Two of them are made for Passover and suitable for people with grain allergies.

"We are dealing with very personal things — religion and culture. You can't just slop together some food. This is the essence of people. It takes a lot of education," she said.

Jackson has a diverse clientele — the military, all federal and some state prisons, hospitals, hotels, nursing homes, mail order, as well as retail specialty stores.

"These are tiny segments of the food business," Jackson said.

"None is big enough to sustain a business. But when you add them all up, we can make money."

Producing kosher and halal food is not a simple thing. My Own Meals has rabbinic and Muslim on-site supervision, Jackson said.

"It isn't just saying a blessing and walking away," Jackson said.

Meat must be humanely

prescribed fashion. Kosher Jews insist that meat and dairy products not be mingled in any way, even in ovens, utensils and packaging. To be halal, a prayer must be said by a God-fearing person over each animal at the moment of slaughter.

Certain foods are forbidden. Neither Jews nor Muslims eat pork. Jews abstain from shellfish; Muslims from alcohol. Even some vegetables such as spinach and cabbage require special attention because they could harbor unkosher bugs.

Kosher standards in the United States are elaborate and well-known, Jackson said. Halal standards are developing.

For instance, a cake mix might have as ingredients gelatin, a meat derivative, and vanilla, often based in alcohol. Kosher Jews would want to know the animal source of the gelatin, but not all Muslims would inquire whether the vanilla had an

alcohol base, Jackson said.

"Halal standards are still in their infancy in this country," Jackson said. "Not all companies have on-site Muslim supervision. There is a lot of mislabeling. But that is beginning to change. Some of these products are shipped to the Middle East and the Muslims there are asking questions."

Five dishes are Halal and vegetarian — including two cheese tortellini dishes, Florentine lasagna, a vegetarian stew and pasta with garden vegetables.

The shelf-stable meals are fully cooked and do not require refrigeration or freezing to remain fresh. The 14 dishes come in microwavable bowls and trays or foil pouches, suitable for campers. The retail prices range from \$2.95 to \$3.95, and \$4.50 for Passover meals. Bulk orders are discounted. For information call (708) 948-1118.

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