

# Mary Anne Jackson Koshers the Army

## Kennedy Cousin Cooks for Colonels and Convicts Alike

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FORWARD STAFF

NEW YORK — Mary Anne Jackson once ran a thriving multi-million dollar business providing natural meals for children that could be shipped anywhere. Then she caught what might be described as kosher fever.

Since then, Ms. Jackson, 43, has embarked on a five-year crusade to provide kosher food to the United States Armed Forces. When a deal was finally struck at the Pentagon, in January 1996, Ms. Jackson had jettisoned her lucrative children's meals business to pursue what had become an obsession — a meal that tastes good, has a long shelf-life and, above all else, is strictly kosher.

Today, Ms. Jackson — an Irish Catholic who is a distant cousin of Senator Kennedy — stands as an example of just how dynamic the kosher food market has become. Her company, My Own Meals Inc., has an exclusive contract with the United States military and the federal prison system. Furthermore, she was the first food producer to have her products certified both kosher and halal, the Islamic dietary seal of approval.

"I love it," said Ms. Jackson, in a telephone interview from her office in Deerfield, Ill. "I really do. Maybe it's because I have gotten good at it."

Her expertise, however, has come at a price. The children's meals she once produced brought in several million dollars a year. Since she turned her operation entirely kosher and halal, she is doing less than half the volume of business — about 500,000 meals — that she once did. Because of the intensive supervision and smaller volume, she also must coordinate an intricate production schedule with subcontractors all over the country.

Ms. Jackson represents an emerging aspect of the kosher business: non-Jews who, for a variety of reasons, are getting involved in a market that some estimate is expanding at more than 20% a year.

"The kosher market is not simply represented by observant Jews," said Rabbi Menachem Gennack of the Orthodox Union's *kashrus* division. "A big part is non-Jews who think that kosher represents a higher quality, either metaphysical or dietary."

Recently, there has been a big push among major food manufacturers to kosher products for mass consumption. Everything from Kellogg's cereals to candy bars now bear a *hechsher*. The trend toward koshering products for mass consumption has been accompanied by an obsession among food producers about the koshering process.

"Anyone who gets interested becomes fascinated" with the kosher culture, said Harry Stern, the president and chief financial officer of the Royal Wine Corporation, which produces brands like Kedem and Baron Herzog.

He said that even one of his Italian wine producers, Bartenura, became so enamored of the koshering process that it had the *moshgidach*, or on-site rabbi, deliver the keynote address at its company convention. "I guess there is a mystical theory about the rabbi having to bless it," said Mr. Stern, who also



**KOSHER COMMANDO:** Mary Anne Jackson doing field research at Fort Polk, La.

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introduced Ms. Jackson to kosher culture, giving her a tour of Brooklyn's various kosher cuisines. "It is a cultural interest more than a specific food interest."

Ms. Jackson's first contact with kosher came accidentally, in the form of a phone call from the Pentagon during Operation Desert Storm. A flood of reservists in the armed forces had resulted in requests for kosher rations, something that the Pentagon had never considered. Because of the small quantity of meals requested, other food manufacturers turned it down. Ms. Jackson was the only one who responded.

When the war ended suddenly, and the observant Jewish reservists went home, the Department of Defense thanked her and told her they would not need her help anymore. "I took exception. I wrote an unsolicited proposal to the Pentagon. I said, 'Just because the war is over doesn't mean the need is.'"

What ensued was a lobbying effort waged by Ms. Jackson that lasted half a decade. It ended up involving virtually every Jewish chaplain in the military, numerous Orthodox Jewish organizations, several generals, a congressman, and an undersecretary of defense.

"One bureaucrat said, 'Mary Anne, there are only five Jews in the military, why do you fight so hard?' I said, 'If there are only five Jews, why are you fighting me so hard.'"

Her efforts culminated when her local congressman, John Porter, phoned the Pentagon from the House floor demanding an end to the numerous bureaucratic holdups and a complete report within 48 hours. The Pentagon finally agreed to move on the proposal, but Ms. Jackson was forbidden from bidding on it.

Military rations are classified as "war-stopper items," meaning that they are considered items essential for war, and therefore are not open to public bid. After years of pushing for the program, the Pentagon essentially took her proposal and gave it to her competitors.

"It got personal," said Ms. Jackson, explaining why she persisted. Not only did the Defense Department take away her proposal, but the program that they eventually approved was not kosher. While the entree was certified kosher, all the other items in the meal were not — apparently the casualty of a bureaucratic snafu.

"First you asked me to do it. So I did it. Then you want to do it your-

self and you are doing it wrong. So let me do it right," she told the military. But the Pentagon added another hurdle to the contract. In launching a kosher program, they insisted that a comparable program of halal also be instituted. Ms. Jackson eventually won both contracts.

The military contract currently calls for about 130,000 meals a year. She does another 200,000 for the federal prison system, and is now trying to get make inroads into the kosher grocery stores serving Jews. While many other food producers have koshered products, like cookies or frozen foods, for a mass market, Ms. Jackson focuses solely on observant Jews:

"Kosher food exploded because it is going after general population America," she said. "We are doing convenient, tasty meals that you can bring with you, that are religiously approved."

Producing food that is both both halal and kosher requires an intricate production schedule. The military contracts requires that an equal variety of each be offered. The *moshgiach* — or the rabbi on the premises — often works in close proximity to the halal certifier.

"We tried to get the halal and kosher communities to work out differences between the slaughtering," she recalls. "We spent an entire day in my lawyer's office going over details. At the end, I said, 'As long as I live, we are going to do this separately.'" While the dairy and parve meals can receive both certifications, the meat meals cannot.

Muhammad Chaudry, the president of the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America, summed up the problem. "Two people cannot slaughter one animal," he said. Mr. Chaudry was the first halal supervisor that Ms. Jackson approached. "She is at the forefront. She does what she promises."

In fact, Ms. Jackson also produced the first manual on halal certification in the United States. "I think that the Moslem market is different. The marketing is totally different. They are two different worlds."

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