

Kids in the kitchen

Microwaves help

By NANCY J. STOHS
of The Journal Staff

CREDIT THE microwave oven. Attribute it to the growth of two-career and/or single-parent households. Call it another example of marketing aimed at time-pressed, yet indulgent baby-boom parents.

Or chalk it up, simply, to an innate love of food.

Whatever the reason, the food industry has zeroed in on a new mass target: children.

The junior chef set is being pursued with great zeal and high expectations on several fronts: from brightly colored, cleverly written children's cookbooks, to microwaveable entrees scaled to tots' tastes and nutritional needs, to a slick new toy with "real" cooking utensils and child-friendly recipes, to special cooking classes.

From early indications, a nation of grown-up consumers is eating it up.

The trend to treat children as food consumers shouldn't come as a big surprise, considering two related factors: concern about poor nutritional habits among children and more youngsters having to fend for themselves at snack and meal time.

Concern about her own young child's workday diet eventually led former Beatrice Foods Co. executive Mary Anne Jackson of Deerfield, Ill., to develop a line of



Journal photo by George R. Cassidy

Joanna and Nancy Koopman prepare mini-pizzas with a Now You're Cooking toy

microwaveable entrees tailored to the nutritional requirements of children.

Before she lost her job after 8½ years, the victim of a company takeover, Jackson would cook on the weekends and freeze foods in meal-size portions for her daughter's baby sitter to fix during the next week, Jackson said in a telephone interview.

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Food firms, publishers zero in on new market: junior chefs

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Once out of a job, planning to start her own business, she said the idea for My Own Meals Inc. (MOM) seemed a natural. After 18 months of experimentation and market studies, and with the help of a food science and technology firm, the mother now of two children introduced five meals last fall. She expects sales this year to exceed \$2 million.

My Own Meals are shelf-stable, making them convenient for lunch boxes or trips, said Jackson. They are not inexpensive, however. The three varieties available at area Pick 'n Save stores sell for \$2.38 to \$2.99 each, depending on variety and location of store.

Although kid-tested for taste, they are not intended for children to prepare themselves.

Another line of kids' entrees, developed by Geo. A. Hormel & Co. and being test-marketed in Indianapolis, Denver and Phoenix, is designed for children to fix.

Intended for kids 5 to 13 (30 million potential customers, says Hormel), Kid's Kitchen meals — also shelf-stable, designed to meet kids' nutritional needs and kid-tested — are packaged in disposable cooking/serving bowls designed for safe use by kids. Recommended selling price is \$1.19 for items with meat, \$1.09 for meatless entrees.

The Hormel line takes the child as food consumer one slick step further. Free membership in a Kid's Kitchen Club (details on the box) comes complete with the requisite membership card, insignia patch and newsletter, plus a catalog of upscale items (some related to food, some not, and some for adults) that can be ordered at special prices — with the right number of product labels, of course.

It's not surprising that the microwave oven would figure prominently in this marketing effort. Some 70% of US households now contain a microwave oven; the figure is 71% for the four-county Milwaukee metropolitan area, according to The Milwaukee Journal 1988 Consumer Analysis. Overall, a microwave is considered safer and easier for kids to use than a stove top or conventional oven. It's also fast.

A recent survey by the Campbell Microwave Institute, run by the Campbell Soup Co., found that in households with a microwave oven, nearly 9 out of 10 children ages 6 to 17 used the appliance.

A new line of cooking playsets introduced last fall by Hasbro, called Now You're Cooking, also capitalizes on the popularity of this appliance. The four sets feature brightly colored, kid-size cooking pans and uten-

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—Bob Nieman, Toys R Us

sils, most of which are microwave-safe. Recipes that come with the set are intended to be made in the microwave (when cooking is required).

The sets — two featuring desserts, one for party food and one for entrees (a deluxe set called Real Meals 'n' More) — sell for \$8.99 to \$26.99. They are intended for children ages 6 or 7 on up. The company would not say how well the toy was selling but Bob Nieman with Toys R Us said it had sold well. "All of the children's cooking stuff, the play food, the shopping sets, has really made a resurgence in the last couple of years," said Nieman, inventory control manager for the Milwaukee area stores.

The sets were developed with input from Rena Coyle, author of two children's cookbooks: "My First Cookbook" (Workman, 1985) and "My First Baking Book," published by Workman last year.

Coyle's oversize paperback books, featuring a character called Bialosky Bear and numerous step-by-step drawings, are far from alone in the cutesy children's cookbook genre.

Pat Van Alyea, owner of Book Bay, a children's bookstore at 2628 N. Downer Ave., evaluated the offerings with her staff and settled on two favorites, which they sell: "Kids Cooking, A Very Slightly Messy Manual" by the editors of Klutz Press (Klutz, \$10.95) and "Vicki Lansky's Kids Cooking" (Scholastic, \$4.95). Both sell very well, she said.

Both are spiral-bound, so they can lie flat when open. The Klutz book features heavy, wipe-clean pages and a set of colorful plastic measuring spoons. The collection of 45 recipes with irresistible titles — "non-yukky vegetables," "not-so-sloppy Joes," etc. — is loaded with brightly colored, imaginative illustrations.

Both offer easy-to-follow instructions and a good mix of sweets and meal-time dishes, though the Lansky book does make use of convenience products such as pudding mixes and refrigerated dinner rolls.

Others include "Betty Crocker's Cookbook for Boys and Girls (Western, first published in 1957) and a list of 10 children's cookbooks published

by Better Homes and Gardens Books, including one book just on cookies, one for the microwave and one called "Fast-Fixin' Kids' Recipes."

Not all cookbooks are by major publishers. Since it came out last fall, Gold Medal flour's "Alpha-Bakery Cookbook," with cute illustrations and 26 recipes from apple crisp to zebra-stripe cookies, has sold more than half a million copies at \$1 each, said a spokeswoman for General Mills.

Some critics argue that a child learns best beside an adult and that an adult cookbook is best. Nell Nash of Whitefish Bay, who has four children ages 2 to 8, sees some value in a special cookbook.

"The pictures make it easier to choose what they want to do," said Nash, who uses the Klutz cookbook with her kids. "I think it makes it more fun. It's special because they know it's their cookbook, not my cookbook."

For parents who would rather leave the teaching (and clean-up) to someone else, cooking classes for kids or kids accompanied by a parent are available. The emphasis seems to be both on nutrition and on cooking from scratch.

Waukesha County Technical College offers two classes, each eight weeks long: one called "Moms and Pops and Kids in the Kitchen," for 3- to 5-year-olds and their parents, and another called "Family Cooks Wisconsin-Style," for 6- to 10-year-olds and their parents.

The YWCA of Waukesha offers a six-week class for preschoolers called "Tots 'n' Pots," a cookie-baking class for young school-age kids and one-shot cooking lessons pegged to the holidays.

This summer, cooking instructor Jill Prescott will offer a children's version of her soon-to-open Elm Grove cooking school, Ecole de Cuisine. Called La Petite Ecole de Cuisine, the sessions for 6- to 8-year-olds and for 9- to 12-year-olds will teach the basics of from-scratch cooking, "without cans or bags," she said.

Kids are delightful to teach, she said, because "they have no preconceived ideas about cooking."

Home economics classes at the junior high and high school level have been around for years. Next year, when Wauwatosa Public Schools switches to a middle-school system with 6th through 8th grades together, sixth graders will start to learn cooking in a required family studies course, said public information director Mary Pat Pfeil.

The basic lessons in safety and simple meal preparation will fall under a broader category in the class: survival skills.

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Strictly for kids: Nutritious meals appeal to their taste buds

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THE IDEA sounds great — microwaveable dinners designed just for kids, miniature versions of what their parents may have come to enjoy for a quick meal. But how good are they?

My Own Meals, developed by Mary Anne Jackson, a food professional and mother of two in Deerfield, Ill., emphasize nutrition but also represent additions and deletions of ingredients based on testing with children. (Green beans were eliminated from a meal, for example, after Jackson learned that only 53% of kids liked green beans. Corn and carrots were substituted.)

Packaged in boilable/microwaveable bags in brightly colored boxes, the entrees include: Chicken, Please (chunks of potatoes and chicken with corn and carrots in sauce), My Kind of Chicken (chunks of chicken with brown rice, peas and carrots in sauce), My Meatballs & Shells (beef

meatballs with raisin bits and shell macaroni in tomato sauce), My Turkey Meatballs (turkey meatballs and noodles with carrots and peas in sauce) and My Favorite Pasta (barley, macaroni, lentils and pork in a creamy tomato sauce).

The meals are free of any preservatives or additives such as MSG, and they were formulated to be low in fat (4 to 11 grams per package) and sodium (440 to 600 milligrams) and high in protein. For tots from 1 to 3, for example, a recommended half-package portion contains 75% of a full day's protein requirement, Jackson said. For kids ages 4 to 10, an entire meal would provide 100% or more of a day's protein need. The meals are recommended for children ages 2 to 8.

The lack of additives came through clearly in a recent sampling of the dinners. All five meals — like stew in consistency — were refreshingly free of any salty processed taste. The meat was very tender and the turkey meatballs clearly were

lean. Unfortunately, the carrots were mushy and the peas had lost their bright green color. Portions seemed right, when teamed with a glass of milk and fruit or other accompaniments, as suggested in My Own Meals literature.

A competitor that still is in the test-marketing stage (not in Milwaukee), Kid's Kitchen by Geo. A. Hormel & Co., comes in seven varieties: macaroni and cheese; spaghetti with meatballs in tomato sauce; chicken chow mein; spaghetti rings in tomato sauce; macaroni and chicken; chunky vegetables and beef in sauce; and beef ravioli in tomato sauce. The product is expected to be available nationwide later this year.

Like My Own Meals, two Kid's Kitchen entrees that were sampled were appealing for their lack of saltiness. Both the beef ravioli and the chicken chow mein tasted noticeably better than canned versions of similar dishes. Unlike Jackson's products, however, they are not entirely additive-free.

As for preparation, the Kid's Kitchen meals, packaged in cook-and-serve plastic disposable dishes, were a little easier to cook and serve than My Own Meals, which come in plastic pouches.

Journal photo by Richard Wood

Prepared microwaveable dinners, some designed for children to fix themselves, are being packaged to meet the tastes and nutritional needs of children

