

# Chicken entree leads the way in new shelf stable meals for kids

Larry Nauman, vp of advertising and public relations for Dominicks, a Chicagoland based grocery chain says "Chicken, Please" from My Own Meal leads sales for that new shelf stable line of children's meals.

BY VIRGINIA LAZAR

**I**t had to happen. Niche marketing has hollowed out so many creative havens in retail grocery sales: homemade anything, low fat everything, no cholesterol "good-for-you" food, pieces of this, extracts of that, slim dinners, gourmet diets, pre-cooked, sliced, sauced... it could go on and on. But there really is something new, an idea for grocery retailers to consider, for poultry suppliers to follow, because if it catches on, it is going to explode into another major grocery category.

"There may only be a couple of companies working with shelf stable products now," Dominicks' Nauman says, "but there are others developing equipment to handle shelf stable production and waiting to see how customers react."

Since this is a relatively new category, "...A lot of customer selling has to be done before most other manufacturers will enter the field. They don't want to be caught unprepared if it really takes off, but they won't go all the way until it really looks like a great opportunity. Processed food manufacturers are on the line and want to be ready," he adds. "Kraft had a full line of shelf stable foods



Mary Ann Jackson.

about 15 years ago, but customers didn't trust unrefrigerated beef stew."

Child-directed dinners are nudging their way on retail shelves and into freezer cases. The child audience is not new, of course: It has been tv-courted for toys, designer clothes, fast-food, skill building, and more. But this is the first time since baby food, that the McDonald's Happy Meal concept will pop out of the freezer, cupboard or diaper bag and promise to provide nutritionally complete meals that children will like to eat. There are currently frozen and shelf stable children's meals on the market.

The biggest question at this point

is whether these are truly viable markets for grocery stores. Are nutrition-conscious, time-short, price sensitive mothers, who will ultimately have to accept the concept, ready? Perhaps they are. The trick is going to be producing a credible product, and then insuring that mothers become aware of it. It could be that the transition from toddler jars to adult-directed table food in most homes could be eased if the child dinners' marketers could control price and capitalize on convenience-habits instilled in the users of junior foods.

"Children like chicken," says Mary Ann Jackson catalyst behind My Own Meals, one of the two pioneering companies offering shelf stable lines of children's entrees. Poultry is featured in 5 out of the 12 current children's entrees sold by My Own Meals and Kid's Kitchen™ by Hormel, makers of Top Shelf, adult shelf stable entree line.

Jackson, formerly with Beatrice, wanted her new business venture to focus on children's meals. "I looked at frozen, and I said, the whole world is in the frozen food business. It is very competitive...To do refrigerated, for me, would be a nightmare: That area needs a company with a delivery service and the ability to handle 30-day product turn-

ences with Holly Farms' Residue Avoidance Program leads me to believe that it has an essential operating component which has meant increased revenues and prevented intolerable losses and bad publicity."

**Microbiological hazards:** Hudspeth told his food technologists audience that live poultry arriving at a processing plant have been subjected to a variety of microorganisms from their environment. They have been grown on litter, such as wood shavings, on dirt floors. From that environment, this poultry contains such potential pathogens as Salmonella, Clostridium, Staphylococcus, Campylobacter, etc. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect raw poultry to be free of potential pathogens.

To assure that poultry food products have as low a bacteria count as possible, raw and cooked poultry products always should be strictly separated, as should any utensils or people who might be vectors of pathogens from raw to cooked products.

Final washers are an excellent source of decontamination along with properly operated chillers. Despite the inferences over the years about "common bath chillers," Hudspeth said the chiller continues to be one of the best decontamination processes in a poultry processing plant. Chlorination is another proven tool to reduce both total count and count of certain pathogens. Normally the longer the contact of the product with chlorine, the better the kill.

Taking note of the move to possibly ban use of certain antibiotics, the Holly Farms executive said he believes the preponderance of evidence indicates that low-level use of antibiotics in animal production is not a significant hazard to human health. He warned, however, that such usage in poultry production must be carefully controlled. ♦

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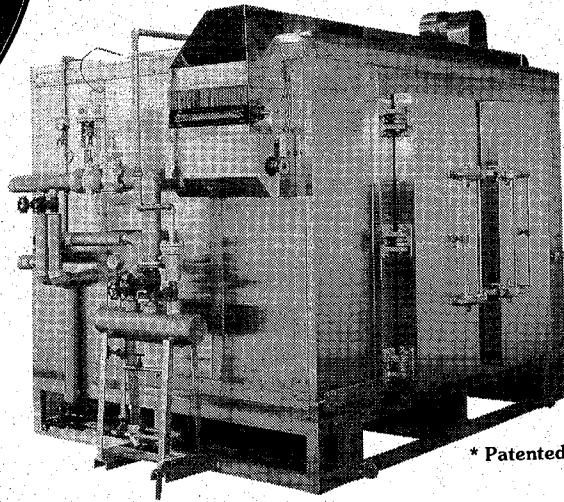
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## CHICKEN FOR KIDS

around. That is a very short horizon. Shelf stable seemed to be the only viable way to go.

"We chose the most appealing, nutritious blend of foods that a child would willingly eat." My Own Meals has 3 poultry-based entrees in its line of 5 dinners controlled in fat, sugar, sodium and preservative-free. Poultry dinners top Dominicks' sales in the shelf stable line.

"At first I anticipate using a few hundred thousand pounds of poultry annually," Jackson says, "but I believe the potential for children's meals is \$500 million annually. That will be much much more poultry."

**The double whammy.** Hormel and My Own Meals are actually dealing with 2 very unique marketing challenges: consumer acceptance of shelf stable products and attracting shoppers to a new market segment. "We see shelf-stable foods in about the same evolutionary stage as fro-

zen food was 25 years ago," says Bill Bernardo, product manager for Hormel's Kids Kitchen™. Those mature enough to remember those days will recall the hard uphill climb to consumer acceptance and technological development. Frozen foods did not put out chicken Kiev, delicate pastries and beef Wellington in those days.

Hormel launched its adult shelf stable dinners and is introducing Kid's Kitchen in the same three test cities, Indianapolis, Phoenix and Denver. "Consumers who are familiar with shelf stable foods value them. Shelf stability simplifies the product for the user. Frozen foods often don't microwave well," Bernardo says, "and children are often just as discriminating as adults about their food. They appreciate the predictability of taste in our shelf stable entrees."

Hormel's poultry dinners contain both light and dark poultry meat. Macaroni & Chicken and Chicken

Chow Mein are among Kid's Kitchen's 7 dinners.

A focus both companies are able to utilize in marketing their dinners is the "squeaky clean" no preservative claim. Jackson even excluded margarine from her recipes and uses butter to insure the accuracy of her claim. Shelf stable foods are prepared with retort cooking which seals the product in a sterile environment so no bacteria can grow. Chemical-conscious consumers read labels and will respond.

Kid's Kitchen 7.5 oz. meals will retail for \$1.09-\$1.19. My Own Meals 8.5 oz. dinners retail for \$2.39-\$2.99.

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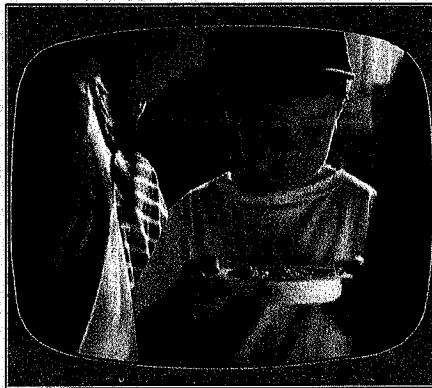
## Who's cooking affects packaging and marketing

Though Hormel and My Own Meals are entering the same new product category in grocery stores, the marketing paths each has chosen are very different:

"One of the comments that came in over and over again was that mothers wanted us to put our value in the ingredients and minimize focus on the container. My Own Meals comes in a plastic pouch," says Mary Ann Jackson of My Own Meals.

Kid's Kitchen is packaged in its own dish. "It's a proprietary container and lid stock configuration that was ...designed for child-self preparation," says Bill Bernardo of Hormel.

My Own Meals targets busy, perhaps slightly guilty mothers who have been behind every phase of product development. Those surveyed "...wanted good quality, nutritious meals that their children would want to finish. Something that could be popped



*Hormel's Kid's Kitchen™ directs its advertising at the child who can prepare his own meal.*

in a purse, packed in a suitcase, taken to daycare, forgotten-remembered-and still used. We did it," Jackson explains. "My Own Meals will last well on the shelf for about a year."

"They asked for a focus on food, portability and price, and the pouch was the answer." Jack-

son's meals are for adult preparation in microwave or boiling water.

Kid's Kitchen, on the other hand, sells to children, appeals to a child's desire to be independent and in control. A tv commercial begins with a typical brag scene: "Boy: I can fix anything... My dad lets me fix his car... My mom lets me fix my dinner." The girl responds: "Prove it!" And he does with Kid's Kitchen.

"The plastic bowl has a removable lid stock and an over cap," says Bernardo. "A child removes the plastic and foil lid with a pull ring. When it is peeled off, the child puts the dome on the bowl and places it in the microwave. The bowl has side handles that stay cool to help the child carry it." The meals are promoted for children through 13 years old, but self preparation is not probable before a child is at least school-aged.