

Food makers jump on microwave kids' meals

By JULIE LIESSE ERICKSON

Microwaveable meals for children are the hot new category in food, and three new products are rushing to grab a piece of the action.

Marketers are so eager to explore the potential of nutritious, shelf-stable children's meals that two companies almost ended up with similar products carrying the same name.

While moving its Kid's Kitchen entrees into three test markets (AA, Oct. 17), Geo. A. Hormel & Co. discovered that an entrepreneurial

company in Denver, Great American Food Co., was doing concept tests on a line of children's meals called Kids' Kitchen in one of those markets.

After meeting with Hormel, Great American Food changed the name of its product to Kids' Cupboard, sources say. The line should be ready for market within the next six months.

But former Beatrice Cos. executive Mary Anne Jackson beat them both to the punch.

Her new company, My Own Meals Inc., this month will launch the first

broadcast advertising for My Own Meal, five shelf-stable meals being moved into Midwestern markets.

The basic premise of all three lines is simple: Parents, particularly working mothers, have less time to prepare hot, nutritious meals but still want their children to have them.

"I think it's a category that has
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My Own Meal and Hormel's Kid's Kitchen (bottom) are moving into test markets.



Meals

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been ignored but whose time is coming," said Nancy Markham Bugbee, chairman of Great American Food.

"Demographics and lifestyle changes dictate a new way to feed families—and the focus will be on children well into the next century," she said.

Canned pasta has been the standard of prepared children's food for years but isn't always considered an attractive alternative to home-cooked meals.

Still, canned pasta sales total \$500 million a year; other kids' foods include boxed pasta and cheese dinners, frozen pot pies and frozen pizza.

Marketers see shelf-stable microwaveable meals for kids as at least a \$300 million market.

Ms. Bugbee is working with former Quaker Oats Co. executive Pete Rhodes and Bayer Bess Vanderwarker, Chicago, to develop Kids' Cupboard, which she called "a significant line of food for children" ages 2 to 8.

Mr. Rhodes is president of Great American Foods, which also is testing other foods and non-food products for children.

My Own Meal is designed "to address the guilt of mothers who want to serve a good meal to their children," Ms. Jackson said.

"I'm a mother, and I know what kids and parents want," she said, "and the taste, texture, color and portion size simply aren't being provided by foods currently on the market."

The new children's products feature kid-size portions of what Ms. Jackson called "children's comfort foods," such as pastas and stews. The meals retail for about \$2.39 each.

Hormel's Kid's Kitchen offers meals heavy on pasta: 7-ounce servings of beef ravioli, macaroni and chicken, spaghetti rings and four other varieties for about \$1.10 each.

"They may not taste good to you or me," said Rick Bross, marketing manager for Kid's Kitchen, "but our children's taste panels and common sense showed that these are the

foods kids like to eat."

But Hormel wants to make cooking into child's play, too.

Kid's Kitchen uses a plastic oval bowl with kid-size handles that stay cool in the microwave. Five-step cooking directions are printed on the back of the package, with safety tips included inside.

"Today's children are given greater responsibility for cooking at an earlier age, and we're meeting their needs in a nutritious, safe and convenient way," said William Bernardo, Hormel product manager.

"This almost teaches children to become self-reliant," Mr. Bross said. Consumer research shows that about 90% of microwave owners allow children to operate the ovens.

Kid's Kitchen will be tested in Denver, Indianapolis and Phoenix, Ariz. A multimedia campaign breaks in February from Ruhr-/Paragon, Minneapolis.

Ads will address both kids and parents. A TV spot stars a boy who claims, "I can fix anything. . . . My mom lets me fix my own dinner!"

A magazine ad says, "Once your kids learn how to feed themselves, who knows what else they'll accomplish on their own?"

The ad is scheduled to run in regional editions of women's service magazines, *Parents* and *Working Mother*.

Free standing inserts and direct mail also support.

Hormel is setting up a Kid's Kitchen Club, offering newsletters, patches and membership cards. Saving proofs-of-purchase can bring discounts of 10%, 25% or 50% on purchases from the Kidatalogue, a catalog of name-brand merchandise including videogames, sporting goods, educational devices and toys.

My Own Meals, which has begun limited print and direct-response advertising, breaks its first radio spot Thanksgiving week; TV will follow when Chicago-area distribution is complete later this year.

Ms. Jackson assembled a team of free-lance creative people to produce the ads, themed "Serve the ones you love My Own Meals."

The company has begun selling My Own Meal in Milwaukee, with Green Bay, Wis., the third target market. Ms. Jackson hopes to sell My Own Meal in most U.S. markets once production capacity is available. #