



My Own Meals creator Mary Anne Jackson of Deerfield keeps the shelves full at the Village Market on Deerfield Rd. "I decided to start my own business after friends asked me to help them plan meals ahead for their children," she said. (Matt Marton photo)

# My Own Meals

## Woman markets meals for children

By Laura Spilberg

A Deerfield woman has developed a solution to the problems of juggling a career with family meal preparation.

She's marketing a new food product called My Own Meals, designed especially for children from two to eight-years-old.

"I decided to start my own business after friends asked me to help them plan meals ahead for their children," said My Own Meals creator Mary Anne Jackson. "I had developed my own way of parceling out dinners for my daughter, Katie, and freezing them for the babysitter to give her at dinner time."

My Own Meals have no preservatives. They contain plastic retortable pouches with a fully cooked meal inside. Retortable means that the food has been vacuum-sealed in an air and moisture-proof pouch and cooked under pressure. As a result, the food retains flavor, color and texture and does not require refrigeration. The meal is shelf stable for one year. The only preparation required is reheating, either by using a microwave oven or by dropping the pouch into boiling water.

The Village Market has My Own Meals placed in the pasta and prepared food aisle of the store. According to Village Market manager Jim Magnuson, "I couldn't keep enough on the shelf for the first few days, they were selling so fast. Now sales are steady."

**IN ADDITION TO** being a mother, Jackson is an eight-year veteran of the commercial food manufacturing industry. Her experience includes managerial work in food strategic planning with Beatrice Corporate in Chicago and in food operations (manufacturing) with Swift-Eckrich of Chicago. She is a CPA and holds a

master's degree in business administration.

She was one of many displaced managers after the leveraged buyout of Beatrice by Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co. in April of 1986, at which time Beatrice went private.

"I figured that I would turn this situation into an opportunity by using the time to start my own business, something that I had always wanted to do," Jackson explained.

Jackson began by surveying potential customers in 1986. She was joined by Elizabeth Martin, formerly of Beatrice Corporate and Beatrice U.S. Food, in 1987. Jackson developed a questionnaire and distributed it with the help of a local diaper service. Then, surveys were distributed demographically to homes throughout Chicago and the suburbs.

**"THE RESPONSE** to our survey was overwhelming. I knew we had hit a nerve. Some mothers attached two and three page letters describing in detail the kind of food product they would like to have available for their children," Jackson said.

Jackson developed a business plan. She researched her potential market and attracted a group of interested investors to enable her to launch My Own Meals.

The next step was to develop the meals. Jackson was joined by Martin and a team of dieticians and nutritional consultants. They developed a variety of meals and began initial testings throughout Chicago and the suburbs.

Test tastings were held in nursery schools, private homes, and day care centers in 1987. Jackson would sit with the mothers and listen to comments and suggestions while Martin talked with the children as they actually ate the meals. Close attention was paid to the likes and

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dislikes, and the test meals were tapered to the childrens' tastes.

"**WE TRIED** to stay away from salts, sugars and any other chemical additives. We wanted a product that we would give to our own children," said Jackson.

After the initial testings, the most popular entrees were selected and further developed into the first five entrees to go into production. First production was in July of 1987. In-home tests were conducted after samples were sent to taste-test participants who submitted their comments for final product modification.

"We used natural ingredients to enhance the flavors, instead of added sugar and salt. For example, when the kids told us that the tomato sauce wasn't sweet enough in the 'My Meatballs and Shells,' we added ground raisins to the meatballs to achieve a sweeter flavor," said Jackson.

The entrees include "My Favorite Pasta," and "My Turkey Meatballs," a dish with ground turkey meatballs, noodles, and peas and carrots in chicken broth. Other entrees include a chicken entree with brown rice, peas and carrots in chicken sauce, "My Kind of Chicken," and a chicken and vegetable stew dish with corn in chicken broth, "Chicken, Please." Full scale production began Feb. 15 of this year.

**VILLAGE MARKET IN** Deerfield is currently selling My Own Meals, which range in price from \$2.69 to \$2.99, depending on the entree. My Own Meals are available by mail order until sold in grocery stores area wide. "My Own Meals will soon be available in grocery stores throughout the Chicago area," said Jackson.