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Her own meals

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Working mom creates fast entrees for kids

By Sue Schmitt
Copley News Service

DEERFIELD — Were she real, even Betty Crocker would serve her kids fast-food burgers and fries after a tough day at the test kitchen. Busy moms are aware that dinner doesn't magically appear on the table at 5 p.m. every day, nutritionally balanced and fixed just the way the kids like it. So they compromise, turning to leftovers and carryout.

A working mother from Deerfield thinks she has the solution to the problem.

Mary Anne Jackson started her own company and is now marketing My Own Meals, a collection of five microwaveable dinners for children ages 2 to 8. The meals have been developed for younger children's tastes and nutritional needs.

The meals, ranging in price from \$2.39 to \$2.99, are available at Dominick's Finer Foods and other selected locations. They also are sold through mail order.

"I think working mothers have a tendency to feel guilty about leaving their children behind," Jackson said, noting that some non-career moms have very busy schedules as well. "They are getting home at odd hours, or maybe they don't have time to make a main meal.

"I know when I was a kid, Mom would make a big dinner and we would all sit down at 5 and all eat dinner together. People just aren't all home at 5 o'clock anymore, and even if they are, kids will be active outside. They'll be going to Little League, going to swimming, ballet lessons, and Mom is driving them all over the city. They don't necessarily all eat together, but you want to make sure that they all eat well."

Jackson learned the basics of food manufacturing during eight years at the Chicago-based Beatrice Foods. When a leveraged buyout of that firm left her without a job, she started My Own Meals in the fall of 1986, with lots of help from what Jackson calls her "invisible army"—a group of experts, also ex-Beatrice employees. Her vice president of administration and mar-

keting, Beth Martin, is another Beatrice alum.

The idea for the product came soon after Jackson entered the world of the working mother. She has two children, Katie, 3½, and Joey, 11 months.

"When I went back to work after my daughter, Katie, was born, I used to make all of her meals in individual cartons and freeze each one. I didn't know what the baby sitter was concocting, and I wanted it so she didn't have to think about what to make for my daughter," Jackson said.

"I wanted to be sure of what my daughter was eating and that it was good, healthy food. So I would prepare it on weekends and set up a menu for the rest of the week."

Jackson's friends were impressed with her planning, and asked her to help them to do the same. When her job went up in a puff of company politics, she decided to get serious about marketing a fast meal for kids.

She sent out surveys through a suburban diaper service and got a positive response. One mother wanted to buy the product on the spot, even though it was just an idea at the time.

She spent a lot of time in product development, starting with 24 concepts, which were then whittled down to 10, then seven and finally the five now in the marketplace.

Along the road were months of concept and product testing with both kids and moms in the Chicago area. The chicken and rice meal known as My Kind of Chicken was not one of the original ideas, but came out of the test group and survey information. So did the decision to include vegetables in the meals.

The other four meals that survived the testing phase are a beef meatball and shell macaroni blend in tomato sauce; barley, macaroni, lentils and pork in tomato sauce; turkey meatballs with vegetables and noodles in sauce; and chicken with potatoes, corn and carrots in sauce.

The food comes fully cooked in shelf-stable retort packaging, which does not require refrigeration. Retort pouches are almost like plastic cans, where food is vacuum-sealed in an air-and-



Copley News Service photo

Mary Anne Jackson, founder of My Own Meals.

moisture-proof container and cooked under pressure.

The meals can be heated in boiling water or popped into the microwave. In a pinch, they could be held under running water to warm the contents.

A consulting nutritionist helped Jackson develop the recipes, which include twists like raisin bits in the meatballs for sweetness. There is nothing artificial in the meals, no preservatives or additives were included.

Parents might find the meals a tad bland, since kids like their food less spicy.

"A lot of the planning was details. We didn't put crinkle-cut carrots in meals because how many moms put crinkle-cut carrots in their food?" Jackson said. "I know I don't. I don't even know how you crinkle-cut them, to tell you the truth."

The meals are packaged by a con-

tract packer in South Carolina. Jackson works closely with production employees at the USDA-inspected plant and checks two pouches from every batch for quality.

Her immediate goal is to make My Own Meals available in every store in the Chicago area. She is sending out letters describing the product to parents, including a nutrition primer that spells out exactly what types of food types need in order to grow. Eventually, she wants a national market.

"I'm not trying to replace fast food," Jackson said. "I'm just saying here is one more option to help you."

"My goal is to have everyone love them as much as I do."

For more information, write My Own Meals Inc., 400 Lake-Cook Road, Suite 107, Deerfield, Ill. 60015.