



Microwavable Meals for Kids: Warm Reception Despite Price

By CAROL FISCHMAN

Two recently introduced lines of microwavable, shelf-stable meals marketed specifically for children have been warmly embraced by consumers, according to buyers polled by Supermarket News. The products, now in test

market, represent an acknowledgment by manufacturers that children — particularly those seeking an easy after-school meal or snack — are a significant force in driving sales of microwavable food, buyers said.

Kid's Kitchen, a product of the George Hormel Co., Aus-

tin, Minn., debuted last January in Denver, Phoenix and Indianapolis. My Own Meals, Deerfield, Ill., has been on the shelves since April, 1987, and is available in the Chicago area as well as northwest Indiana and Wisconsin.

Kid's Kitchen comes in seven varieties: spaghetti and meatballs; beef ravioli; chunky vegetables and beef; spaghetti rings; macaroni and cheese; chicken chow mein, and macaroni and chicken. Suggested retail price ranges from \$1.09-1.19.

My Own Meals, said to contain no preservatives, MSG or artificial ingredients, is available in five varieties: Chicken,

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— Jack Paulk
buyer, merchandiser
ABCO

Please (a mixture of light and dark chicken with potatoes and carrots); My Kind of Chicken (light and dark chicken combined with brown rice, carrots and peas); My Favorite Pasta (a combination of ground pork, macaroni, barley and lentils in tomato sauce); My Meatballs and Shells, and My Turkey Meatballs.

The product comes in a microwavable pouch that can also be boiled. Suggested price points are considerably higher than Kid's Kitchen, ranging

"Customer response to My Own Meals has been very positive. The products definitely get repeat sales," said Jim Magnuson, store manager, Deerfield Village Market, Deerfield, Ill.

"It retails for about \$2.98, which some consider costly; but once they buy it, they buy it again. They know they are paying for a nutritional product with no preservatives."

"There are a lot of items in the aisle, but My Own Meals has proved itself to be a best seller," said Joe Cortesi, store manager, Sunset Food Market, Highland Park, Ill. "We merchandise it right at eye level, and people really go for it."

On the other hand, Frank Kamberos, company official, Treasure Island Food Store, Chicago, said that sales fo

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Own Meals are slow in his stores, and blames it on the high prices and lack of advertising.

"The product is a good idea, but sales are not going well. They have not had much publicity at the consumer level.

"The items are more expensive than Chef Boyardee and other canned items. The company needs to help movement by advertising the line's

benefits, such as its ease of preparation and portability."

Tom McCabe, vice president of procurement, Indiana Grocery Co., said that Hormel's Kid's Kitchen is showing solid movement in his stores. "The items are doing very well. We had a couple of in-store demonstrations for the products and we saw sales increase."

"For a new item, Kid's Kitchen is moving well," said

Bill Spear, director of merchandising, A.J. Bayless Market, Phoenix. "We have an advertisement for it coming up and would be receptive to conducting an in-store demo.

"The product is a little more expensive than canned goods, but like any convenience, there is a trade-off with price."

Jack Paulk, buyer-merchandiser, ABCO, Phoenix, said he is happy with Kid's Kitchen's performance. "The line is mov-

ing twice as well as Impromptu and Top Shelf. There is some resistance to the product because of its price, but it fills a need.

"We have given the items some basic promotion. We ran two roto ads with manufacturer funds, and the color exposure gave them more coverage."

"Kid's Kitchen is doing very well. It's a good product with a lot of potential," said Don Murphy, grocery buyer, Alber-

tson's, Denver.

"It took a while for it to catch on, but we are very happy with its movement. We have run newspaper ads as part of the manufacturer's allowance, and that seems to have created a consumer awareness that has helped sales."

In terms of merchandising, most retailers reported placing the items in a shelf-stable section in the prepared food aisle.

"Initially, we placed the shelf-stable products in with the canned meats, near the spaghetti sauce, but they blended in with everything," said Paulk of ABCO.

"Now, we have a 6-ft. section for shelf-stable microwave products. It makes a nice, neat total block of products that really helps with sales because it attracts customer attention."

While Kid's Kitchen is tentatively scheduled for a national rollout in 1990, and My Own Meals is just breaking into Ohio stores, a third company is coming to market: Great American Food Co., Denver.

"We are currently developing Kid's Cupboard, a similar type of product, that will have low sodium, no additives and be specially balanced for children," said Nancy Markham Bugbee, chairman.

She said that Kid's Cupboard will be introduced within the next few months.