

Kids Meals

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Kyle S. Moore, 4, insists that dinosaur-shaped macaroni tastes better than plain old elbow macaroni.

"He's on this kick where he won't eat any macaroni except the kind that's shaped like dinosaurs," said Kyle's mother, Cheryl A. Moore of Jackson. "He's a real dinosaur freak."

Fortunately for kids such as Kyle, food manufacturers are becoming increasingly aware of their youngest consumers. While breakfast cereal manufacturers have been targeting children for years, only recently have manufacturers of foods such as frozen dinners and boxed macaroni started pinpointing younger connoisseurs.

New Jersey-based Mullers, for example, once known only for such classic macaroni shapes as elbows, shells and twists, now offers macaroni shaped like jungle animals, teddy bears, monsters and dinosaurs. As a further attraction

for young eaters, the Super Shapes line is packaged in boxes which feature colorful pictures, as well as games, activities and fun facts.

Part of the reason for this trend may be the increasing say children have as to what goes in the shopping cart.

"Kids these days have a lot of say about what their parents buy," said Mike G. Adkins, grocery manager at Meijer, 3333 E. Michigan. Adkins' insights come both from observing his own children and watching how youngsters act in the store. "There are so many TV advertisements directed to kids, and when they see something on TV and then see the same product in the store, they want it."

One of the first manufacturers of convenience meal products to target a younger market was Chef Boyardee. The company has been producing ABCs and 123s canned pasta since 1980, and in the last few years the company has expanded its line to include pastas shaped like Smurf cartoon charac-

ters, dinosaurs, Pac-Man and sharks.

"Nearly 60 percent of canned pasta is eaten by children," said Linda Mulrenan, spokeswoman for the New York City-based company. For that reason, she said, making the pasta in shapes that children will enjoy makes sense.

Children also have begun finding foods to both catch their eyes and please their taste buds in the frozen foods department.

About three months ago, local stores began carrying a line of frozen dinners by Banquet called Kid Cuisine. Like most of the foods marketed specifically for children, Kid Cuisine is packaged in bright, colorful boxes. "That's a big drawing card right there," said Meijer's Adkins.

The line features such kid favorites as chicken nuggets, macaroni and cheese with mini franks and a beef patty sandwich with cheese. "We've had them on the shelves for about three months. They go over really well," Adkins said.

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Kids

Not all manufacturers of children's mealtime products are interested in luring young consumers with fun shapes and brightly colored packages. At least one company is more concerned with winning over parents.

"We market the only kids' meal that is really going after moms as opposed to the kids," said Jack R. Gordon, vice president of advertising and marketing for My Own Meals Inc., based in Deerfield, Ill.

My Own Meals are vacuum-packed child-size servings of meals designed to meet the nutritional needs of 2- through 10-year-olds. The meals come in a pouch which can be microwaved, boiled or — in a pinch — warmed under hot tap water.

"It's something that Mom would be happy serving the kids," Gordon said. The My Kind of Chicken meal, for example, is chunks of chicken with vegetables served with brown rice and sauce.

The company was founded by Mary Anne Jackson. "As a mother herself," Gordon said, "she found herself cooking a lot of meals on Sunday and freezing them to re-heat and serve to her daughter later in the week. So she put two and two together and came up with something she felt a lot of mothers would appreciate."

Here are some other foods which are intended specifically for children:

- Franco-American canned dinners — Spaghetti O's now are joined by Teddy O's — pasta in the shape of teddy bears — and Sporty O's — pasta in the shape of skateboards, bikes, roller skates and baseballs.

- Looney Tunes Meals by Tyson — Frozen dinners for children featuring such delicacies as Sylvester fish sticks, Yosemite Sam barbecue glazed chicken and Speedy Gonzales Beef Enchiladas.

- Turtles and Cheese Pasta Dinner by Primera Foods Inc — Fans of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles will be delighted with this twist on traditionally boxed macaroni and cheese dinners. Also available is Dinosaurs and Cheese Pasta Dinner.

 **BUY 0**