

Meals for kids eye market

Arkansas may get microwave product

By Lamar James
Gazette Staff

The Chicago businesswoman who lays claim to pioneering microwavable dinners for children now wants Arkansas parents and their children to enjoy her product.

Mary Anne Jackson is president and founder of Chicago-based My Own Meals Inc., which produces a line of microwavable or boilable meals for children in so-called shelf-stable, or sealed, plastic pouches.

The line is not available in Arkansas, but Jackson, who was in Little Rock on Wednesday, hopes it will hit Arkansas stores by the time school starts in the fall. She is trying to strike a deal with Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and area grocery chains.

And what if Wal-Mart agrees to sell the line in its stores?

"It would be a tremendous boost for us because of the quality image of their stores and their distribution base. The association would be wonderful for our business," Jackson said.

My Own Meals is sold in several states and military commissaries across the country, but expansion has not been as rapid as Jackson would like.

"If you're a big company like the other players in this category, you can go into the market and spend all that money on advertising," she said. "We have to build it up over time because, unlike them, we have to go out and raise the money from outsiders and it takes a little more time."

My Own Meals, she said, produced the first microwavable meal for children. Although major companies like Tyson Foods Inc. of Springdale and ConAgra Inc. of Omaha, Neb., have moved into the highly lucrative market, Jackson said she isn't too worried.



JoEllen Black/Gazette Staff

EASY AS PIE: Mary Anne Jackson, founder of the My Own Meals line of shelf-to-microwave children's dinners, promotes her products Wednesday in Little Rock. She hopes to enter the Arkansas market.

She cites what she says are her product's advantages: It's easy to store and use, has no artificial preservatives and is priced right at about \$2 a meal.

"It's very basic, nothing very fancy ...," she said. "The product formulation and concepts are all mine. I sought out recipes and we asked for input from consumers."

Tyson's Looney Tunes line and ConAgra's Snoopy's Choice and Kid Cuisine meals are frozen.

Jackson said that because My Own Meals aren't frozen, they can sit on the shelf rather than taking up limited freezer space, or they

can be carried in a purse.

The meals' packaging carries the "my" theme in its names: My Turkey Meatballs, Chicken Please, My Meatballs and Shells, My Kind of Chicken and My Favorite Pasta.

During an interview at the Capital Hotel, hotel employee Sandra Ward stopped to look at meals Jackson was carrying with her. Ward was interested in the nutritional information and list of ingredients.

Jackson said she started My Own Meals in 1986 after eight years working for Beatrice Co., a major food company.

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