

Thursday, May 3, 2001

PIONEER PRESS

Local company makes shelf-stable Kosher food

By RUTH SOLOMON
STAFF WRITER

A Deerfield company will be supplying the first kosher meal in space next year after an Israeli astronaut made the request.

"My Own Meals," a kosher food supplier of shelf-stable food, headquartered at 400 Lake-Cook Road, is owned by Deerfield residents Mary Anne Jackson and Joe D'Onofrio.

The business has made Jackson, who is not Jewish, an expert in the complex rules of kashrut, the ancient laws that require Jews to avoid pork and shellfish and to eat only food whose meat ingredients are separated from the milk ingredients as part of the Biblical injunction to "not seethe a kid in its mother's milk."

Jackson can even explain to restaurants the practical aspects of making their kitchens kosher.

Onofrio and Jackson related their story of how two non-

Jewish entrepreneurs grew to become the major supplier of kosher food for the military, backpackers, and anyone else requiring non-refrigerated kosher meals when far away from home.

"It's been incredibly difficult," started off D'Onofrio.

Food background

Jackson worked at Beatrice Foods back in the late 1970s to 1980s. While at Beatrice, Jackson worked on the Eckrick meat brand and the Tropicana orange juice brand, and was in charge of corporate strategic planning and new product development.

Then Beatrice was bought out and Jackson told her husband, an accountant with a major accounting firm, that she wanted to start her own business, making non-kosher shelf-stable healthy food for children.

"She developed the market in the mid to late 1980s. We were way ahead of our time," said D'Onofrio, who also has

food background as his parents owned Bays, a fast food Italian beef restaurant in Skokie.

It was a good idea but people weren't ready for it, he said.

At this point, stores started suggesting that Jackson make her shelf-stable food kosher. "You have everything except for kosher certification," they told Jackson.

Military market

Jackson latched onto the idea and in 1991, when Operation Desert Storm hit, she found herself with a potential major customer: the U.S. military.

"Women in charge of pushing the buttons for the Patriot missile and others who kept kosher were all asking for it," recalled Jackson.

Reservists were being called in from all over the U.S., and many wanted kosher meals.

Up until that point, those in the military who wanted kosher meals had to bring their own food from home, usually tuna fish or peanut butter, said Jackson. "They had kids who passed out from not eating enough," said Jackson.

It took five years, from 1991 to 1996, and pleas from Jewish organizations and former Congressman John Porter before seven military agencies agreed on January 16, 1996 to allow kosher food.

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Richard Bajjalieh/Pioneer Press

Deerfield residents Mary Anne Jackson and Joe D'Onofrio display their product, "My Own Meals," a kosher food supplier of shelf-stable food, headquartered at 400 Lake-Cook Road.

After the Gulf War, their market dried up. "The military said no war, we don't need (kosher rations) anymore. So we said you still need them for trained exercises," said D'Onofrio, who ended up quitting his job with the accounting firm to work full-time with his wife on the business.

In 1996, Jackson and D'Onofrio got a three-year contract with the military. "We finally made back all the money we had invested," said D'Onofrio.

Rabbi inspected

Now My Own Meals supplies backpackers, local kosher grocery stores (Hungarian supermarket in Skokie carries their food), and universities, include a new contract with Northwestern University for their student cafeteria where they will supply single meals for \$2.75. (Single meals can be ordered at www.ko)
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■ Kosher food *Continued from page 10*

shersupermarket.com or cases of 12 meals can be ordered at www.myownmeals.com).

Their food is made at a plant in Salem, Oregon, where the technology exists to produce pouch foods, said Jackson. Rabbis from Chicago are flown out to inspect the plants, which have the approval of Rabbi Moshe Solo-veichik. The food is then assembled in Chicago, said

Jackson.

NASA found out about My Own Meals when one of their employees who had helped develop the project learned that the Israeli astronaut wanted kosher food. "No one else in the world makes kosher (shelf stable) meals," said D'Onofrio.

The astronaut, Col. Ilan Ramon, will be eating five varieties, including beef stew, la-

sagna, and Chicken Mediter-ranean, said Jackson.

People are surprised when they find out Jackson and D'Onofrio are not Jewish, said Jackson, who has three children, including two at Holy Cross School in Deerfield. "I don't get into the religious ramifications. I handle the practical aspects and don't pretend to be an expert in that arena."

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