



Richard Bajjalieh/Pioneer Press

My Own Meals of Deerfield makes shelf-stable Kosher Food. They are supplying Kosher space food for the Israeli astronaut.

Local company supplies food for Israeli astronaut

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When Col. Ilan Ramon became the first Israeli astronaut in space earlier this month, a local couple were watching with a unique sense of connection to the event.

Mary Anne Jackson and her husband Joe D'Onofrio were not interested in the launch for reasons of science, national pride, or security. Their focus was more mundane: how the astronaut liked his meals.

Jackson and D'Onofrio run My Own Meals out of an office on Lake-Cook Road, which creates shelf-stable Kosher food. When NASA heard about their product, they enlisted the company to prepare meals for Ramon.

Prior to his launch, Ramon had selected five kosher choices from My Own Meals: Florentine lasagna, chicken Mediterranean, My Kind of Chicken (chunks of light and dark chicken with brown rice, peas and carrots), Old World Stew (beef with brown rice, zucchini, pinto beans and Middle Eastern flavors), and chicken and noodles, Jackson said.

So far, there's been no word on how Ramon likes his meals. "Right now, NASA is not focusing on the novelty of eating kosher food," Jackson said.

Ramon does not keep kosher himself, but thought he should in space, given he is the first Israeli astronaut. Rabbis have also been debating over when and how long Ramon should observe Sabbath in space.

Though not Jewish, Jackson had detailed knowledge of the rules of kashrut, the ancient laws requiring strict separation of milk and meat during food preparing and eating based on the Biblical precept

to not "seethe a kid in his mother's milk."

For starters, all the meals prepared by My Own Meals have been carefully supervised by rabbis working for Rabbi Moshe Soloveichik of Chicago, she said.

First, the animals are ritually slaughtered in New Jersey (chicken) and Iowa (beef) and then flown out to Oregon.

Then two rabbis working for Soloveichik fly out from Chicago every week to the manufacturing plant in Salem, Oregon to supervise the cooking process, said Jackson, who also joins them frequently.

Starting Monday morning, the plant, which is also used to make non-kosher meals at other times, undergoes a complete transformation to satisfy kashrut rules, starting with boiling every utensil at 212 degrees and steaming all equipment at 230 degrees, she said. In the mountains of Oregon, heating water that high can be tricky, she said.

The rabbis not only supervise the cleaning process but weigh out the food and stir the food, at the insistence of Rabbi Soloveichik, Jackson said. "Until the last item is put away, they participate in the cooking process," she said.

The food products also satisfy another obscure Jewish rule: Yashon, which means no grain can be eaten that was harvested between the most recent harvest and the spring festival of Passover. "It must be from last year's harvest," Jackson said.

My Place Meals kosher food — for astronauts, backpackers, or anyone requiring food from a pouch — are available locally at Hungarian Kosher Foods in Skokie. For those with food allergies, the company also has a gluten-free product available at "Gluten-free Market" in Buffalo Grove.