

Business

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Food industry whistling not-so-Looney Tune

By P. J. Bednarski

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F. LAUDERDALE—The food industry is quickly finding a new niche: prepared foods specifically designed for children between 2 and 10 years old.

Tyson Foods, the giant poultry

marketer, on Wednesday said it will introduce Looney Tunes Kids Meals, featuring Bugs Bunny and other Warner Bros. cartoon characters on the packaging, in April. Looney Tunes will offer eight microwaveable children's meals—four of them with chicken—and is looking for \$100 million in sales

from what Tyson thinks is a \$250 million market.

Tyson's made its announcement to food stock analysts meeting here this week with top executives of the nation's leading food companies.

Earlier in the week, Richard Knowlton, president and chief ex-

ecutive of Austin, Minn.-based George A. Hormel Co., touted the company's new Kid's Kitchen line that he said is "on a rapid build now in seven test markets."

In addition, Con Agra is marketing microwaveable Kids Cuisine. And Deerfield-based My

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My Own Meals has marketed its children's meals regionally since 1987.

Kids

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Own Meals has marketed its children's meals regionally since 1987 and has expanded to Toys 'R' Us shelves in parts or all of 13 states, including New York, New Jersey and northern California.

Hormel's Kid's Kitchen and My Own Meals—M.O.M. for short—are locked head to head in another category: both are so-called shelf stable, meaning the package doesn't have to be refrigerated before being popped in the microwave. Mary Ann Jackson, president and founder of M.O.M. says, however, that of the new brands, only My Own Meals uses no preservatives.

All of the products, however, plug into the growing use of microwaves. Early ads for Kid's Kitchen showed a child placing the meal into the microwave and drew criticism from safety experts who advise children under 10 not to use microwave ovens. (My Own

Meals explicitly warns against children preparing the product.)

Microwave foods have \$2 billion in annual sales, much of it fun food like popcorn and hamburgers. Tyson Food's Looney Tunes, a frozen product that is microwaved, will take that fun trend to a new level by launching a Saturday morning television commercial blitz featuring Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Tweety Bird and five other Warner Bros. cartoon characters.

"We think it's going to be a major product for us," said Don Tyson, chairman and son of the Arkansas-based company's founder. "If my daddy knew I'd be using a bunny rabbit to sell chicken, he'd knock me in the head."

Tyson also benefits from last year's Time Inc. merger with Warner. As part of the licensing agreement with Warner Bros., Tyson said it will get a "substantial discount" on print ads it will run in 15 Time-Warner publications.

The move toward tapping the children's market is, of course,

demographically astute, too. General Mills told analysts Tuesday it was introducing 'Cheerios to Go,' small-sized packages of Cheerios toddlers can carry around to munch on. And Gerber Baby Foods will expand into what it calls the "toddler market" of children, 1 to 3 years old, a market it estimates at 12 million.

"Toddlers tend to eat macaroni and cheese and stews and snacks designed for the adult market," said Alfred A. Piergallini, chairman and chief executive at Gerber, which already owns 70 percent of the baby food market. "We think we can extend our presence up the age spectrum."

Robert L. Johnston Jr., president of Gerber Products Division said Gerber "tracks" U.S. births remaining at or near 1989's 3.9 million through 1991. That gives Gerber and other manufacturers targeting children a pipeline of consumers to build on. "I don't think it's a mature business yet," Johnston said, apparently oblivious to the pun.