

# MOM's cooking finds a spot in kitchens, grocery shelves

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## CLEVELAND

Former Clevelander Mary Ann Jackson used to spend Sunday nights preparing a week's worth of meals for the baby-sitter to feed her young daughter.

As director of operations and planning for the Swift-Eckrich division of Beatrice Cos., she felt guilty because she couldn't find nutritious, convenient alternatives to home-cooked meals. These days Jackson, 38, doesn't have to worry about that.

She created My Own Meals Inc. (MOM) in 1986. The microwavable meals for children are sold in Heinen's and Stop-n-Shop supermarkets in Greater Cleveland.

"Peanut butter and jelly only lasts so long," Jackson said. Her prepackaged meals, similar to the military's meals ready to eat (MREs) have a one-year shelf life. They are similar to canned goods, only they come in a heavy plastic pouch.

In preparation, the meals, with titles like My Meatballs and Shells, are given a burst of steam to force air out before pouches are sealed. The food is then pressure-cooked in the sealed pack, which makes the food commercially sterile. There are no preservatives or additives, Jackson said.

She started the Deerfield, Ill., company after losing her job at Swift-Eckrich after a corporate buyout. Rather than diving back into the corporate arena, Jackson decided to go into business for herself. "I didn't start a nuclear

power plant. I came out of the food market, and I stayed in food," she said.

Jackson decided there was a market for precooked food aimed at children. She chose to sell shelf-stable foods because, she said, they are more nutritious than frozen meals. And there is less competition among shelf-stable products than among frozen foods.

Jackson invested her own savings into the business, hired free-lance workers and contracted with a production facility. Although she has a master's degree in business administration, starting a business was an education in itself, she said.

The most important lesson concerned financing, she said. "When people start a firm, they think they can go to a bank," but the savings and loan crisis has made lenders even more skeptical than they were about investing in new ventures.

Realizing that, Jackson instead sold stock in her company to friends, but retained control.

She also had to contend with competitors going into grocery stores to stick coupons for their products on her boxes. And she's had to educate consumers to keep them from heading to the frozen food section of stores to look for her meals, which sell for \$1.99 and \$2.49.

The experiences have taught her one thing: to keep a positive attitude.

"If anyone (starting a business) has a thought for just one minute that they won't make it, they won't," she said.

## Muffin

### FROM/1-G

They originally created a cafe-type eatery that served muffins and beverages. It evolved into a restaurant that served breakfast and lunch with an emphasis on muffins.

In the fall of 1988, they purchased a yogurt shop in Akron and restruc-

idea that it would be the turning point.

"We even made them bring their own buckets," recalled Marks, a former accountant.

The basement of the building was converted into a small manufacturing plant, and a walk-in freezer was added. After finding a food-service distributor to carry the line of batters, the company landed an account with a local McDonald's franchise and began supplying three stores.

hind its building. By 1991, the company was supplying 14 food-service distributors in Northeast Ohio, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, Pittsburgh and Detroit.

The business had outgrown the muffin shop and moved into its present quarters in February 1991. The two retail muffin shops, along with a third in Stow, have been sold to allow the owners to concentrate on making batter.

"Our mission is to make it easy for



PD/MIKE LEVY

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# Shorter term or lower payments? (Pick any two.)

*In leasing, as in life, you're often asked to give up one thing in*

