

MEALS

Frozen foods for kids

By Candy Sagon
Los Angeles Times Service

For years, the booming market for frozen food concentrated on appealing to adults, but now it is youngsters who are being seen as a new source of frozen assets.

Several companies are offering frozen, microwaveable meals for youngsters.

Unfortunately, say nutrition experts, these manufacturers do a better job at packaging than they do at nutrition.

"It's a packaging gimmick," charges Jayne Hurley, a registered dietitian and nutrition researcher for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, based in Washington. "The industry has been producing some healthy frozen-food choices for adults, but they're sliding backwards with the kids' stuff."

Hurley's main criticism of lines like ConAgra's "Kid Cuisine" and Tyson's "Looney Tunes" meals is the excess fat and salt. Both fat and salt are major factors in the development of heart disease.

Although the American Heart Association recommends that people over the age of 2 get no more than a third of their calories from fat, several of these frozen meals provide 40 percent and more of their calories from fat.

In addition, both lines average a high 700 milligrams of sodium per meal, Hurley notes, with some reaching a whopping 1,000 milligrams.

Youngsters aged 7 to 10 should have between 600 to 1,800 milligrams of salt daily — which means that just one of these meals can provide a whole day's salt intake.

Ironically, ConAgra, which produces Kid Cuisine under the Banquet label, also produces a highly recommended line of frozen food for adults called Healthy Choice, which meets all American Heart Association nutrition guidelines.

ConAgra also produces, under its own trademark, a new line called Snoopy's Choice, which is billed as the kids' equivalent of Healthy Choice — with low-fat, low cholesterol and sodium-controlled spaghetti and meatballs, as well as macaroni and cheese.

Hurley has a little more praise for My Own Meals, a line of shelf-stable dinners that is being test-marketed.

"They have some refreshing

ingredients like brown rice and lentils, but they also add cream and butter which provide extra saturated fat that kids don't need," she says.

The frozen kids' meals are so new that most dietitians are unfamiliar with them. Among the few who have sampled them is Cindy Cunningham, director of nutrition services at Dallas' Children's Medical Center, who recently analyzed the meals and agrees that they are far too high in fat and salt.

However, she does point out that they are lower in fat than a typical "Happy Meal" from McDonald's, something which ConAgra spokeswoman Susan Hanley also promotes.

"Most fast-food meals are 40 to 50 percent fat and Kid Cuisine is lower than that," Hanley says. She also says

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Products for the younger set

We're a country full of busy parents, close to 65 percent of whom have school-age children. Moreover, 75 percent of Americans own microwave ovens, with estimates that almost 65 percent of children use them. It's obvious, then, why food producers see a potential \$250 million product category: frozen and shelf-stable microwaveable foods for kids.

A number of companies are test-marketing such meals, which come packaged in colorful containers with stickers, games and puzzles.

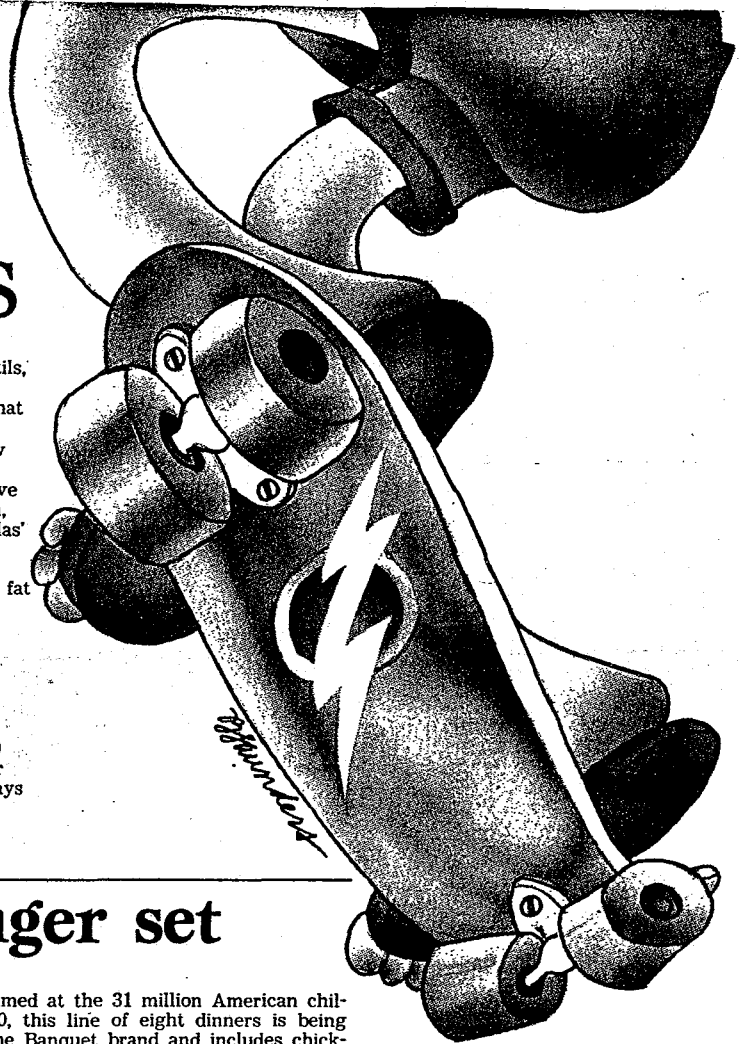
Here's what's new:

■ Frozen

Kid Cuisine: Aimed at the 31 million American children, ages 3 to 10, this line of eight dinners is being marketed under the Banquet brand and includes chicken nuggets (with French-fried potato bites, apple sauce and a fudge brownie); fried chicken; and pizza.

Tyson Looney Tune Meals: Eight entrees in this Warner Brothers food fest include Road Runner Chicken Sandwich, Tweety Macaroni & Cheese, Daffy Duck

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Kids' meals may not be healthy

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the company promotes the frozen meals as a "special treat, fun food" for occasional use.

But JoAnn Hattner, a pediatric nutrition specialist at Children's Hospital at Stanford University in California, believes youngsters may be eating these meals more frequently than an occasional treat.

"I've already seen some of my adolescent patients using them as after-school snacks and for dinner," she notes.

"I think it's a sad commentary on today's nutrition for children. The best gift you can give a child is healthy food."

Cunningham also criticizes the products' labeling, pointing out that one spaghetti dinner had no nutritional information at all, while another had a misleading claim about fat.

"The Looney Tunes ham-

burger pizza advertises that it's only 8 percent fat, but that's how much fat there is by weight. What the public needs to know is what percentage of the calories comes from fat," she explains.

She believes the meals are "not harmful, but they are a gimmick."

"They're cute, quick and convenient, and I'm sure kids will love them," she says, while cautioning parents against relying on them for a

quick dinner.

"People think that a hot meal is somehow better for you, but that's not necessarily so. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich with some carrot sticks, an apple and milk is healthy and avoids all the problems of these frozen meals," she notes.

She suggests that parents freeze leftovers on a plate and let children microwave them for a fast meal.

Frozen foods for youngsters

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Spaghetti & Meat Balls, and Bugs Bunny Chicken Chunks.

Kidstuff: A line of five kinds of pizzas plus corny dogs marketed by Tony's Pizza.

■ **Shelf-stable**

Snoopy's Choice: From the makers of Healthy Choice adult

dinners come these low-fat, low-cholesterol, sodium-controlled kids' dinners.

My Own Meals: Mary Anne Jackson, a 36-year-old CPA, MBA and mother of two, started this small company — My Own Meals Inc., in Deerfield, Ill. — about four years ago. The line is available by mail order and in 1,000 grocery stores in 10 states. Five en-

trees developed for children ages 2 to 10 include such refreshingly wholesome combinations as Homestyle Turkey Meatballs & Noodles With Vegetables in Sauce; Chunks of Chicken With Vegetables and Brown Rice in Sauce; and Barley, Macaroni, Lentils and Pork in a Creamy Tomato Sauce.

— Candy Sagon