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Feeding Baby

The growing trends in healthful foods finally spilled over to better foods for babies and toddlers.

Considering the sudden flood of healthful, organic baby and toddler foods to hit the market in the past couple of years, it's hard not to wonder what took so long. After all, for more than a decade supermarkets have been adding to the shelves thousands of healthy and organic foods and beverages for adults.

While the 20-40-year-olds were feeding on the double-digit growth of the health and wellness category of comestibles, kids were having to go straight to adult foods from jars of mainstream pureed foods and juices whose health score was measured by the sugar to "real fruit juice" ratio.

One catalyst might have been the Feeding Infants and Toddlers Study (FITS), conducted by Gerber Products Co., Fremont, Mich., and Princeton, N.J.-based Mathematica Policy Research Inc. The groundbreaking study found too many of us were feeding our infants and toddlers on junk and semi-juices.

"Two of the biggest strategic issues for the food and beverage industry worldwide are the problem of rising rates of obesity and overweight among children and the still-untapped opportunity for the food industry to develop and market healthy kid-specific products that delivers real benefits," observed Research and Markets, a Dublin, Ireland, market research and data firm.

Note to Marketing

Organic is still a much sought tag. In spite of rising food and energy costs and stagnant salaries, Americans are pushing growth in the organic and healthful categories at an increasing rate. Several surveys, especially a large survey released April 30 by Collingswood, N.J.-based Mambo Sprouts Marketing Inc. (www.mambosprouts), show that, even in hard economic times, consumers are willing to pay up to 20 percent more for organic items versus their conventional counterparts, especially so when it comes to foods for their little ones.

Feeding the Baby—con't

In just the few years since that February 2006 report, dozens of companies, small and large, paid heed with new lines of foods for babies, toddlers and young children. Organic baby food sales alone have leaped by over 20 percent per year since 2006, according to the Nielsen Co.

As the Research and Markets report noted, these trends hold true not only for the current market but will “continue to resonate for many years to come.” That the demand for such products is running against economics proves the viability of developing and producing healthful and organic foods formulated specifically for our little ones.

Yogurt takes the lead

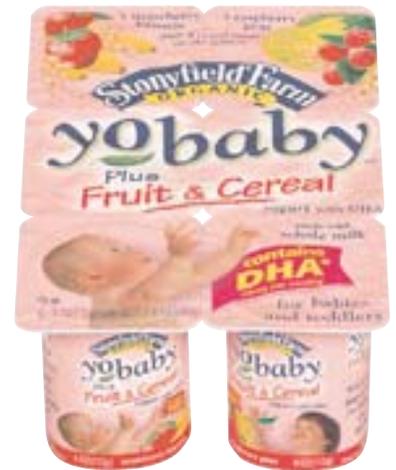
Yogurt was one of the first food categories to see formulations developed specifically for babies and toddlers. It's cold, sweet yet tangy, smooth and creamy and dairy—all things that appeal to kids starting on solids. YoBaby and YoKids, by Stonyfield Farm, Londonderry, N.H., is an example of how successful and well-entrenched yogurt for the young quickly became.

The Stonyfield lines are made with whole milk from cows fed organic feed and without antibiotics or artificial growth hormones. They also are fortified with iron and DHA, one of the key omega oils, and made without gelatin or any artificial ingredients.

The company also makes smoothies, dairy-free soy “yogurts” and cereals.

The yogurt products contain six live active cultures, and all the fruits and grains in Stonyfield Farm products are grown without toxic/persistent chemical pesticides or fertilizers. Another sharp marketing move recently made by Stonyfield was to reduce the amount of sugar in all YoBaby yogurts.

Yogurt may have blazed the trail, but other products soon followed.



Feeding the Baby—con't

Although healthy/organic pioneer Hain Celestial Group Inc., Melville, N.Y., certainly wasn't the first to "go organic" with baby formula and food, its Earth's Best line, released a few years ago, marked a turning point for the category. Experienced at taking once-fringe health foods into the mainstream, Hain's Earth's Best bridged the gap between the small and regional processors of healthful, organic baby foods and the big-brand processors who were still making traditional products.

Earth's Best, which recently became the first baby food brand to be certified free of genetically engineered ingredients, uses vegetarian omega oils from Martek Biosciences Corp., Columbia, Md. Martek specializes in the production and refinement of DHA from algae. DHA is critical for development and function of brain, nerve and eye tissues in both developing fetuses and infants, and it remains an important nutrient through adulthood.

"Both EPA and DHA are important in brain function and development and are essential especially during the formative years as children grow rapidly," explains Ian Lucas, executive vice president at Ocean Nutrition Canada, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, another producer of omega oils. "The western diet lacks these essential nutrients for the majority of children, so including them in infant and toddler foods enables children to get this important nutrition in their diets."

Ocean Nutrition developed a unique delivery technology that enables food manufacturers to include EPA and DHA in a wide variety of foods without altering product flavor or aroma. The trademarked technology, Powderloc micro-encapsulation, employs a double-shell protection so the oil isn't exposed to the food chemistry and oxidation.

Feeding the Fetus

The omega-3 fatty acids DHA and EPA are the major structural fats in the brain, spinal cord and retina. This makes them vital to growing fetuses. Whereas folate, critical to proper development of the spine, is now added to most flour products in the U.S., omega oils have yet to reach the level of inclusion folate enjoys. But a number of products are on the market to address this early intervention for baby's health. Baltimore, Md.-based Vincent Foods LLC (www.ohmamabar.com) makes its Oh! Mama bars specifically for pregnant and nursing women. Fortified with DHA, they're a satisfying alternative to regular energy bars.



Feeding the Baby—con't

“To date, we’ve successfully commercialized more than 30 food applications with this ingredient,” says Lucas. “North American examples of omega-3 food products for infants and toddlers include Stonyfield YoBaby Yogurt, Danino Yogurt, Dr. Sears chews for kids, Kemp’s milk, Wonder Bread and Tropicana Heart Health Orange Juice,” he adds.

Another lipid product vital for fetal and infant brain growth and development, as well as all cell growth and function, is phosphatidyl serine (PS). This constituent of the brain phospholipids is found naturally in human breast milk. Lipogen Ltd., Haifa, Israel, provides a natural PS derived from soy lecithin for use in infant formulas and functional dairy products.



Lipogen PS recently attained FDA generally recognized as safe status. Also, Lipogen PS is produced without the use of solvents. Solvents in the extraction process of some brands of omega oils caused controversy recently over whether the resulting products can be labeled organic.

Babies, especially those who arrive early, often suffer from digestive system issues—specifically gas—as their gastrointestinal systems develop and acclimate post-partum. “Chamomile and fennel have a long tradition of use to calm the digestive system,” says David Hart, product manager of functional foods for Frutarom Ltd., Hertzliyah, Israel.

Frutarom developed its patented HyperPure production process to ensure its natural extracts of herbs such as chamomile and fennel contain the lowest levels of pesticides. “Safety is one of the most important factors in making foods and beverages for babies and toddlers,” adds Hart.

“These products meet the exacting standards of the German ‘Deutsche Diätverordnung’ purity rules for baby foods,” says Hart. “Products formulated with Frutarom’s botanical extracts answer the consumer desire for more ‘back-to-nature’ nutrition, including using natural and traditional ingredients.”

Organic and other attractive descriptors

While organic is probably the main way processors are breaking away from the pabulum-in-a-jar paradigm, there are a number of other approaches, including gluten-free, fresh, additive-free and other qualifiers. Some also are forsaking the jar.

Feeding the Baby—con't

One company, Culver City, Calif.-based Homemade Baby, added one particularly unique component to a product line that incorporates most of the trends. The company's line of organic, gluten-free, fresh, non-GMO, kosher baby foods includes traceability for every single ingredient.

The company's foods are marketed fresh (available in resealable plastic containers in super-market dairy cases) and cover three spectra of ages, with three different texture designations. The "So Smooth" are single-ingredient items for 6-9-month babies, the "Good Mushy" line are slightly textured, multi-ingredient recipes for 9-12-month-olds and the "Kinda Chunky" have more texture in the multi-ingredient formulations for new toddlers cutting teeth.

Not content to make better foods for paying customers, Homemade Baby also employs the increasingly demanded aspect of corporate responsibility by helping to feed the poor. Ten percent of all the food it manufactures goes to charities serving undernourished children, and a percentage of its income supports Feed the Children.

Happy Baby Inc., Brooklyn, N.Y., makes its certified organic, frozen-from-fresh baby foods with ingredients that look more at home on an adult menu. "Research shows babies have much more sophisticated palates than previously understood," says Kantha Shelke, principle for Corvus Blue, a Chicago-based consulting firm. "Adding interesting flavoring to their food allows them to develop broadened taste preferences, while adding healthful components they might otherwise not get."

Happy Baby makes products using ingredients such as protein- and iron-rich red lentils; quinoa ("Also high in iron, and it contributes to a complete protein," adds Shelke); and herbs and spices such as mint, cinnamon and cardamom. ("Mint, in addition to providing vitamins A and C can help soothe tummies and relieve indigestion," notes Shelke.) Happy Baby also includes DHA in some of its offerings.

Recently, Happy Baby rolled out a line of dry cereals targeting immunity. Vitamin- and mineral-fortified, the cereals include probiotics for digestive health. They also are allergen-free, without nuts, soy, dairy, sugar, wheat or eggs. All Happy Baby products are organic, made from non-GMO ingredients grown without pesticides or chemical fertilizers.

Feeding the Baby—con't

Plum Organics took the approach of frozen-from-fresh for its baby foods as well. Plum, too, adds DHA to many of its offerings. Greens, grains, beans and lentils are the backbone of its similar three-stage approach to formulations, with the focus on bright colors, natural flavors and varying textures. Unlike many of the other companies, the company offers some meat and poultry items as well, using only organically raised products.

“We believe that, by exposing infants and children to authentic, minimally processed foods, one can positively influence their taste buds and appreciation of healthy foods for life,” writes company founder Gigi Chang.

Maddy’s Organic Meals, Chicago, goes for a more targeted range in its version of the three-life-stage approach. Formulating for ages 4 months, 6 months and 8 months, the company also changes textures and flavor complexities accordingly for its organic, flash-frozen meals without preservatives, fillers or additives.

Using the amusing acronym of “M.O.M.,” Maddy’s uses ingredients grown “in the heartland,” on Midwestern, certified-organic farms practicing pesticide-free, sustainable farming methods.

The later early years

“I strongly believe that ‘food for kids’ is not merely a trend but a movement that is here to stay,” says Jill Litwin, owner of San Francisco-based Peas of Mind LLC. The maker of “all natural eats for growing kids” is one of the more innovative processors to grow out of the nascent category.

The company focused on actual menu-item innovation and on striving to stay ahead of the trend by “continuing to design really good, wholesome food for kids—not just food shaped (to appeal to) kids, or adult food portioned for kids,” says Litwin.

Peas of Mind was an early adapter to the idea of the need for age-specific foods in this category (from ages 1 to around 6). As Litwin states, “Healthy, wholesome meal options for this age group are still very limited and parents are looking for choices they can feel good about feeding their children.”

Feeding the Baby—con't

“This category will continue to grow because it is proven—through childhood obesity, diabetes and other health crises—that what we feed our children strongly affects their development,” explains Litwin. “Children at this age have finished breast- or formula-feeding and are being introduced to solid foods and require different nutrients than an older child.” She also notes the critical role early foods play in children’s food choices in the future.

Peas of Mind’s main product is Puffets. Described as “mini casseroles,” the organic, hand-held offerings may be shaped like hockey pucks but they are typical of this new paradigm in kid foods in having a flavor and texture that appeal to adults as well (the “Nanna’s Banana” ones are positively addictive).

Puffets function as complete meals designed to be easy for busy parents to prepare. Currently, they come in six varieties—Mamma’s Pasta, Dalai Lentil, Black Bean Polenta, Eat your Greens, Carrot Risotto and the aforementioned Nanna’s Banana. Some Puffet flavors are gluten- and/or dairy-free.

Each pre-cooked Puffet formulation was designed to contain ingredients from the four major food groups, including whole milk (for calcium), eggs (for protein and omega-3s), organic vegetables/fruits/beans (for vitamins and minerals) and grains.

Foods such as Puffets—firm enough to cut up and serve, yet soft enough for young children to chew and swallow—also encourage self-feeding, which is an important stage in childhood development, Litwin points out.

Covering the transition from toddler to school kid, Annie’s Inc./Annie’s Homegrown, Napa, Calif., was another maker of organic foods that understood kids’ needs early with a line of mac-n-cheese products, shaped pasta meals and snack crackers (most shaped like the Annie’s bunny). The company also just entered into the highly competitive ready-to-eat cereal market with a line of organic, whole-grain cereals.

Not only does the company focus on its use of organic ingredients, without additives or preservatives, it, too values traceability. Annie’s “believes in transparency,” and “sources only from places and people we trust, with high emphasis on quality (and) agricultural and environmental sustainability.”