

**T**HERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT A BABY THAT JUST SEEMS TO EMBODY THE VERY MEANING OF PURITY, and today's parents are making it a priority to ensure that their newfound bundles of joy get a head start when it comes to developing wholesome eating habits. Organic baby food and fresh, flash-frozen varieties for toddlers are helping consumers in their quest to keep their children's diet clean and fresh.

While the baby food category has traditionally been dominated by two major forces—Florham Park, N.J.-based Gerber and Latham, N.Y.-based Beech-Nut Nutrition Corp., respectively—observers note that the rise of Earth's Best, which currently ranks third in the category in terms of dollar share, indicates a shift in overall momentum. With a 4.4% dollar share of the baby food and snacks category, the Melville, N.Y.-based manufacturer of organic baby food posted a notable 43% increase in dollar sales for the 52 weeks ended Feb. 24, according to Chicago-based Information Resources, Inc.

Industry experts say that alternative offerings such as Earth's Best and Gerber's Organic line have opened the door for some much-needed innovation in a category that has remained unchanged for decades. "If you think about the conventional baby foods in the jars, whether they're organic or not, there really hasn't been any real innovation in 50 to 70 years," says Gigi Lee Chang, president and founder of New York-based Plum Organics. "There have been advances in small ways, but nothing that has significantly improved the nutrition, taste or texture of the product."

## MEETING NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

Insiders say that nutrition is a key issue for parents in light of the childhood obesity epidemic. "I have spoken to pediatricians who have seen children as young as 10 months who are overweight," says Kalpna Solanki, president of Bobobaby in Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada. "There are huge problems in regards to obesity such as the increased presence of type 2 diabetes, which is typically seen in elderly adults but is now being seen in young children."

With recent research indicating that children develop their taste preferences between 2 and 3 years of age, insiders point to a clear need for baby food products that deliver a sound nutritional base

through a variety of foods. "We acknowledge the responsibility that the choices parents make can make a difference in the way that their child's future taste preferences and eating behaviors develop," notes David Glasser, founder and CEO for Randolph, N.J.-based First Juice, a manufacturer of organic fruit and vegetable juice beverages for toddlers.

For parents concerned about food safety, the switch to organics is typically the first change they make to their children's diets, experts note. "Pound for pound, babies are consuming much more fruits and vegetables

# GROWING UP. organic

BY SUZANNE VITA PALAZZO

Conventional manufacturers and entrepreneurs are making it convenient for parents who want to feed their children natural and organic food.





than your average adult will be, because they are fed them morning, noon and night,” says Kimberley Bremer, category group manager of infant and toddler feeding for the Hains Celestial Group. “So in terms of the potential exposure and the higher proportion of contaminants that come their way, one might infer that would be greater in a baby than in an adult.”

In addition to organic varieties of jarred baby foods, fortified products similar to what many adults feed themselves are also starting to appear on store shelves. For example, a few manufacturers have chosen to enhance their offerings with the inclusion of DHA, an essential fatty acid known for its ability to support healthy brain development.

“We introduced DHA into baby food five years ago, so we’re the innovators with DHA,” says Kevin Vining, vice president of trade marketing for Beech-Nut. “What we have today is DHA Plus where we have a prebiotic, which aids in digestive health as well.”

But some observers point out that despite efforts by manufacturers to fortify their products with particular vitamins or nutrients, the traditional method of jarring baby food presents a challenge when it comes to maintaining nutrition. Explains Lisa Beels, chef and co-founder of New York-based Petite Palate: “With jarred baby food, the product has to be heated up in the jar to such a point that it kills a lot of the vitamins and nutrients, and sometimes they have to be injected back in as an additive after it has been prepared.”

#### EXPANDING THE MARKET

Enter a whole new era of baby and toddler food, typically designed by a growing group of manufacturers known collectively throughout the industry as “mompreneurs.” Ambitious and motivated, these businesswomen have been compelled to create a healthy alternative to jarred baby food after giving birth to their own children and realizing that they were unsatisfied with the products available on the market.

“It certainly isn’t an easy road. It takes a tremendous amount of tenacity, especially after just having a baby,” says Beels, who produces an organic, frozen line of baby food. “We feel that our frozen offering is so much closer to fresh food. It would be awesome to serve kids fresh dinners every night, but logistically speaking it’s just impossible, so the next best thing to having homemade is flash freezing it.”

Theresa Kiene, founder of Homemade Baby, a Culver City, Calif.-based manufacturer of fresh, organic baby food products that are carried in grocers’ produce or dairy sections, agrees. “The thing that I’m noticing is that beyond the organic choice that parents have been making for awhile, the new trend is fresh,” she says.

Observers note that fresh offerings such as Kiene’s as well as flash-frozen varieties made by Petite Palate and Bobobaby present the

opportunity for moms to offer their children a greater diversity of foods and flavors. Indian and Hispanic varieties have proven to be popular choices for consumers as have items that offer whole grains such as quinoa, millet and brown rice.

"I think parents have broken out of the mold of the misconception held by previous generations that babies should eat only bland foods," says Kiene. "That's not true at all. In fact, babies love strong flavors as long as they're developmentally appropriate for the maturation of their intestines and their chewing capabilities."

However, despite the potential for fresh and flash-frozen baby food to offer nutritional superiority and homemade appeal, veterans of the industry are skeptical of the trend's staying power. In particular, the convenience of such items often comes into question, considering that frozen items require moms to defrost and sometimes heat up the products for baby's consumption.

"Frozen food is an emerging trend that is gaining popularity in natural channels as well as some mainstream channels," notes Valerie Shukovsky, marketing manager for Gerber Organic. "While they are growing, we expect them to remain a niche product."

### MERCHANDISING SHIFT

Frozen baby food presents retailers with a merchandising challenge, since consumers aren't accustomed to shopping for baby and toddler products in the frozen food aisle. "I think that getting moms to the freezer aisle so that they can see that it's available is the biggest challenge facing the frozen baby food category," says Beels.

Jill Litwin, owner of San Francisco-based Peas of Mind, a manufacturer of frozen, all-in-one meals for children 12 months and up, believes that exposure of the category continues to expand as more companies offering frozen baby and toddler products enter the market. "It's not just one company that drives. I think there's definitely a collective of companies that have lines of frozen foods for babies and kids," she says. "It's a collective group of manufacturers that help drive parents to the freezer section."

In regards to merchandising shelf stable baby food products, industry insiders stress that



## RAISING HEALTHY EATERS

In an effort to combat the epidemic of childhood obesity, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has teamed with Florida's Healthy Start Coalitions to launch a nutrition education initiative named Fresh From Florida Kids. The program aims to educate parents about early childhood nutrition, and provide them with tools and resources to make their own baby food at home using fresh fruits and vegetables.

As the official retail partner, Publix is offering participants redeemable incentives for purchasing fruits and vegetables throughout all three stages of the program. The grocery chain also offers a Preschool Pals program and a Baby Club that provides educational materials and coupons to parents of babies and toddlers.

According to Yolanda Roundtree, development representative supervisor with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, researchers have shown that children develop taste preferences and eating habits before they are 3 years old. Teaching children to eat right early on can develop a lifelong preference for healthy food, and help avoid obesity and other diet-related health risks later in life.

"Educating parents on the benefits of introducing a variety of fruits and vegetables at an early age is the first step," says Roundtree. "Parents need to be assured that feeding fruits and vegetables is safe and easy. Once parents see just how easy and economical homemade food can be, they're sold. Homemade foods are very flavorful, colorful, and nutritious."

The program, which began in January as a pilot, is divided into three phases according to age group. Three thousand mothers recruited from five regions of the state each received a Fresh From Florida Kids Kit containing a food grinder, freezer tray, storage container, and information binder with step-by-step recipes, as well as tips on how to improve the overall health and fitness of the entire family. The same information will also be posted on the program's publicly accessible Web site.

As the wellness movement continues to soar, health conscious parents are seeking alternatives to conventional baby food offerings on store shelves. Retailers can provide such consumers with tips and recipes on how to prepare homemade baby food in addition to highlighting particular foods in the produce section. "Many supermarkets already print recipes cards. But they can take it a step further and include instruction or specialized cards for creating baby's meals or kid-friendly versions," says Roundtree. "They may even consider offering in-store demos for parents and tying such demos into their fresh produce displays."

For more information, visit [www.FreshfromFloridakids.com](http://www.FreshfromFloridakids.com) —Julia Peck

presenting a variety of products is crucial to the segment's success. "There are a lot of retailers that carry only one brand," says Vining. "Based on IRI research, we show that if you carry two of the leading brands you can actually sell more product."

Packaging also has a direct impact on a product's ability to be effectively merchandised, as has been demonstrated by Gerber's introduction of plastic packaging for a majority of its puree business in 2003. "We found that plastic cups are the packaging of choice," says Shukovsky.

Looking forward, Gerber and its innovation through its organic and DHA lines are expected to fuel category growth, while industry observers keep a watchful eye on the impact of fresh and flash-frozen varieties. However, participation from the big brands may be necessary in order for the emerging segment to truly penetrate market share.

"I've been hearing from the rumor mill that there may be some bigger conglomerates wanting to make fresh baby food, and I think it's great, because it legitimizes the category," says Kiene. □