

Bon Appétit, Baby!

Local Company Creates Worldly Line of Baby Food

By Elizabeth M. Gillespie

As my daughter neared 6 months of age and was getting ready to eat solid foods, I had grand visions that I'd make most of it myself. I bought a cookbook and eagerly eyed up fancy recipes like a spinach, potato, parsnip and leek purée, a lentil purée with carrots and sweet peppers, and an apricot and banana custard.



But like many working moms, I could never seem to find the time. My husband would just as soon have fewer dishes to wash, so we started buying mostly jarred foods and mixing in puréed broccoli and other high-nutrient extras whenever we could. As a rule, I took a taste of just about everything I fed Sylvia. Most of it was bland at best. I'd try to mix different varieties together to enhance the flavor a bit, adding a touch of carrots to a blend of spinach and potato, or a dab of hummus to a jar of squash. But for the most part, it didn't improve things very much.

So I was intrigued when I learned about Dr. Susanna's World Baby Foods, a line of flavorful, organic jarred purées created by Dr. Susanna Block, a Seattle pediatrician, and her husband, Jonathan Scheffer, also a doctor. They started their company about

a year and a half ago, adding things like dill, curry, ginger and coriander to their concoctions to get little ones' taste buds familiar with herbs and spices from all over the world.

Although sweet, carbohydrate-rich foods lacking much flavor make up the bulk of most U.S. babies' diets today, Block and Scheffer noticed that infants all over the world tended to eat a much more varied diet, in most cases whatever their parents ate. In Indonesia, mothers would mash up fruits and fish and mix in chile, cinnamon or cardamom. In Alaska, babies would eat salmon or caribou mixed with berries just like mom and dad.

"There's no research that says you have to give your baby bland food," Block said.

Block's theory, based on a growing body of research, is that babies who enjoy a wide variety of flavors as their palates develop are less likely to get hooked on sugary, salty, highly processed foods that are low in nutritional value – foods that are contributing to increasing rates of obesity in both children and adults. I also couldn't help wonder if introducing ethnic foods to babies early on would help prevent them from becoming picky eaters like my daughter, who at one point would eat little besides pasta, pears and Cheerios.

I decided to conduct a World Baby Foods taste test on Sylvia and started

with "Que Pasa Calabasa," a blend of apple, squash, yam, garbanzo beans, cilantro and mild chili. Sylvia likes squash, so I called it squash soup. At first, she wanted none of it. I snuck a dab on her lips – a trick that occasionally gets her interested enough to give a new food a try. She spit out what little of it made it onto her tongue, rubbing it all over her face while yelling: "No watch soup! No watch soup!"

After a few minutes of whining – I'm not sure what made her change her mind – she grabbed for one of the spoons on her tray and started shoveling it in. Within minutes, she was saying "Num num!" in between bites. She polished off the whole jar quickly.

For dessert, it was "Sweetie Tahiti," a mix of banana, rice, pear and coconut. When Sylvia got her first look at it and realized it wasn't yogurt, as she'd thought it was, she pushed it away and said, "No, no, no," and then – a little more quickly this time – came around and started scooping it up, once again proclaiming, "Num num!"

She wasn't as into the beets, potatoes, carrots, pears, spinach, apples and dill of "Baby Borsch" – she may have inherited the gene that makes her mom think beets taste like dirt – but she slurped it down when I mixed it into one of her latest favorite foods: alphabet soup. The same thing was true for "Tokyo Tum Tum," a mix of soy, ginger, apple and brown basmati rice, and "Baby Dal," made of lentils, brown rice, carrots and apples and seasoned with cumin and coriander. By the time we got to the last of Dr. Susanna's six varieties, "Lullaby Thai," a blend of bananas, pears and jasmine rice with ginger and cardamom, I mixed it in with the applesauce she's always loved. She seemed momentarily perplexed by the thicker texture, but ate it all in minutes.

Block notes that it's important for parents to introduce their babies to their first fruits and vegetables one at a time, a new one every few days, to rule out allergies. But she's found that most kids graduate from the single-food phase pretty quickly. "As soon as your child has had carrots and lentils and apples, they're pretty much ready to try our stuff."

When I talked to a few other moms whose babies have really liked Dr. Susanna's foods, they all said it was a bit pricey for their taste – around \$2.50 a jar. But they said they felt good buying it because it's made with organic produce, most of which is grown in Washington and Oregon.

"It is pricey," said Deanna Woo, a Kirkland mom whose baby girl, Madison, was a World Baby Foods fan before she moved beyond jarred food. "But knowing that it's a local company, and they're supporting local farmers, and that they use good-quality stuff – that makes a big difference."

Elizabeth M. Gillespie is managing editor of Seattle's Child.

Where you'll find it:

- Whole Foods in Seattle's Westlake neighborhood, Redmond and Bellevue; also in Hillsboro's Tanasbourne Market Center in the Portland area
- TOP Food and Drug in Snohomish and Woodinville, expanding to all 32 TOP Food and Haggen grocery stores owned by parent company Haggen beginning in August
- Artisan Table in Woodinville
- Online at www.worldbabyfoods.com

Price: Retail prices range from \$2 to \$3 per 4.3-oz. jar. If you buy a case online, it's \$2.50 a jar, which includes the cost of shipping.

ONE-AND-A-HALF-YEAR-OLD SYLVIA GILLESPIE GLEEFULLY GOBBLES UP A JAR OF "SWEETIE TAHITI" – AFTER SOME INITIAL HESITATION. PHOTO BY ELIZABETH M. GILLESPIE