Thinking Outside The Can

Campbell’s Soup CEO Denise Morrison is cooking up a new recipe to court consumers obsessed with healthy eating

By Eliza Gray

At the Campbell’s soup headquarters in Camden, N.J., CEO Denise Morrison is taking me on a tour of the company store, where employees can buy products at a discount. Morrison breezes quickly past the items Campbell’s is best known for: the classic red-and-white cans of condensed tomato soup, Pepperidge Farm breads and Goldfish, and Prego spaghetti sauces. She wants to show me the perimeter of the store, where the refrigerated and fresh items are kept.

“One of the things that I’m so excited about—I love my food,” she says, opening the package of a new Campbell’s product, a squeezable tube of fruit puree and Greek yogurt. “Mom can freeze it and put it in the lunch box. It’s a better-for-you snack for kids that doesn’t exist in fresh.” Next, she points out a transparent bag of baby carrots, decorated with cartoon vegetables. “We have veggie snackers. These are pouches of carrots with seasoning—you shake it up and it tastes like ranch. Want to try it?”

I bite into a powder-covered carrot. “It tastes like a potato chip,” I offer.

“It crunches like a potato chip!” she exclaims delightedly, adding, “25 calories!”

As the head of one of the world’s largest food companies, Morrison has the job of applying the core DNA of a firm that sells 2 billion cans of Campbell’s soup each year to shifting American tastes, constantly searching for a new take on the notion of convenience food. Something, perhaps, like a potato-chip carrot. As anyone who has read a restaurant menu or walked the sprawling organic aisles of a supermarket knows, Americans are fixated on eating healthier—even if they don’t always follow through. For all the desire to eat fresh, working parents face the challenge of getting family dinner on the table.

So for Campbell’s to succeed, it must
give parents foods that satisfy their idea of what’s healthy and appeal to the average kid without dirtying a dish. With every new kale-quinoa Greek yogurt trend, that task gets keeping harder. After 35 years on the job, Morrison continues to contend with critics who lament Campbell’s lack of health-conscious parents; the pouch is intended to help baby foods feed themselves.

In her vision pans out in time. "It is sort of like breathing for her."

"I think that. It means you lose sight of the vision."

For new parents, in the two and a half years she was running the business, Morrison recalls: "The one that I was the most proud of was..."

"We have to keep developing new products in different categories and for different kinds of occasions."

"For many Americans, those 'occasions' often mean a minute or less snacks on the way out the door instead of a sit-down family meal—unless it can be prepared in 27 minutes, the daily U.S. cooking average, according to food expert Michael Pollan. "Our lives are being lived in smaller, bite-size pieces," says Alexia Howard, a senior analyst at Sanford Bernstein who follows Campbell’s. "As and baby boomers age and millennials fret about what goes into their bodies, those snacks had better be healthy. "People want to read the label and under- stand what they are eating," says Howard."

"This has translated into a boom for fresh foods. In 2014, sales for fresh pro- duce and meat grew by 5% over the year before, according to the most recent Nielsen data, while groceries in the cen- ter of the store—home of the packaged goods—were down 1.4%. That trend to- ward vegetables will only continue. Only 5% of baby boomers report “often going vegetarian," according to a Hartman Group study, but 12% of millennials do. And those consumers want fresh.

The drive toward real food explains why Morrison would invest in baby carrots—a product closer to a commodity than a processed good. "When I found Bolt- house Farms, one of my board directors said, ‘Carrots, Denise, really? ’ And I said, ‘No! Packaged fresh! It’s an $18 billion cat- egory growing at 6% to 7%! ’ That growth has since slowed, but one way we can bring our capabil- ities and brands to fresh food,” she says. “I love the carrots. The authenticity.”

"But for Campbell’s, the point isn’t try- ing to get everyone to eat only unprocessed foods. Instead, it’s catering to consumers who want healthy meals but still need convenience (or tastes that stick."

"So Morrison goes on. One of her lat- est moves: the acquisition of Plum Organ- ic, a line of organic soups in January. For now, we'll see if she can pull off in a two-career household. Which means Campbell’s can now offer parents baby foods in flavors like pumpkin date- oats chia and kale apple Greek yogurt that come in a tube instead of a jar so toddlers can feed themselves. "My 5-month old grandchild eats kale because of Plum,” Morrison says. “We are training the baby’s palate to like healthier foods at a very young age.”

Up next, Bolthouse might bring its ap- proach to new veggies like celery or cher- ry tomatoes. Plum will promote products for adults, and Campbell’s will launch a line of organic soups in January. For now, Morrison projects confidence. As she tells aspiring CEOs, “Things don’t always go ac- cording to plan, so you have to have the courage and agility to course correct. That doesn’t mean you lose sight of the vision.”