CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A nutritional composition comprising

a lipid or fat source;

a protein source; and

a probiotic stabilized in a protective matrix, the protective matrix comprising,

a. a hydrolyzed protein;

b. a first carbohydrate chosen from sucrose, maltose, lactose, trehalose, maltotriose, maltodextrin having a dextrose equivalent of 2 to 6, and any combination thereof; and

c. a second carbohydrate chosen from inulin, polydextrose, galactooligosaccharide, fructooligosaccharide, starch, maltodextrin having a dextrose equivalent of greater than 8, and any combination thereof ; and

d. a lipid selected from the group consisting of lecithin, monoglycerides, diglycerides, and any combination thereof.

2. The composition of claim 1, wherein the probiotic comprises viable microbial cells.

3. The composition of claim 2, wherein the viable microbial cells comprise *Lactobacillus rhamnosus*.

4. The composition of claim 1, wherein the matrix further comprises sodium alginate.

5. The composition of claim 1, wherein the matrix further comprises pectin.

6. The composition of claim 1, wherein at least 20% of the total hydrolyzed protein is comprised of protein having a molecular weight of less than 2000 Daltons.

7. The composition of claim 1, wherein the hydrolyzed protein comprises hydrolyzed casein.

8. The composition of claim 1, wherein the hydrolyzed protein consists of hydrolyzed casein.

9. The composition of claim 1, wherein the nutritional composition is a powdered infant formula.

10. A method for protecting a viable probiotic for use in a powdered nutritional composition, the method comprising:

a. providing a viable probiotic;

b. preparing a protective matrix for the probiotic by blending

(i) hydrolyzed casein,

(ii) a first carbohydrate chosen from sucrose, maltose, lactose, trehalose, maltotriose, maltodextrin having a dextrose equivalent of 2 to 6, and any combination thereof,

(iii) a second carbohydrate chosen from inulin, polydextrose, galactooligosaccharide, fructooligosaccharide, starch, maltodextrin having a dextrose equivalent of greater than 8, and any combination thereof and

(iv) a lipid chosen from lecithin, monoglycerides, diglycerides, and any combination thereof;

c. combining the viable probiotic, the protective matrix and water to produce a mixture;

d. drying the mixture of step (c) to a final moisture content of 4% or less; and

e. adding the dried mixture of step (d) to a powdered nutritional product.

11. The method of claim 10 , wherein the viable probiotic comprises *Lactobacillus rhamnosus*.