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Meals That Moms Can Almost Call Their Own
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SEATTLE

Jodi Robbins and her family were on a grim dinnertime merry-go-round.

Takeout pizza was a mainstay, except on the nights when Chinese food seemed more appealing. When Ms. Robbins cooked, it was spaghetti or tuna casserole over and over, with rarely enough time to make a salad.

Their routine was expensive, fattening and boring. In the rush to get through the day, the family had lost control of the dinner table.

So Ms. Robbins now goes to Dream Dinners in West Seattle, where she spends just under two hours assembling dishes like cheesy chicken casserole and Salisbury steak from ingredients that have been peeled and chopped for her. She does not have to pick up a knife, turn on a stove or wash a dish.

All she has to do is pop the meals in her oven and, for about \$3.50 a serving, experience the satisfaction of putting a home-cooked meal -- of a sort -- on the table.

Americans, pinched for time and increasingly uncomfortable in their kitchens, have been on a 50-year slide away from home cooking. Now, at almost 700 meal assembly centers around the country, families like the Robbinses prepare two weeks' worth of dinners they can call their own with little more effort than it takes to buy a rotisserie chicken and a bag of salad.

The centers are opening at a rate of about 40 a month, mostly in strip malls and office parks in the nation's suburbs and smaller cities, and are projected to earn \$270 million this year, according to the Easy Meal Prep Association, the industry's trade group.

"It's been keeping us from ordering pizza all the time," Ms. Robbins said. "And you still feel like you're cooking."

The prototype, a kind of elevated cooking session among friends in a commercial kitchen, popped up in the Northwest in 1999. The concept did not take off until 2002, when two Seattle-area women streamlined the process so customers could make 12 dinners for six in two hours for under \$200. That company became Dream Dinners, which opened a year later and now has 112 franchise stores, with 64 under construction.

Super Suppers, which opened a year later in Fort Worth, is the largest chain, with 121 franchise stores and 77 more under construction. For people with few cooking skills, the centers keep things simple with a rotating menu of mostly stews and casseroles designed to be assembled in freezer bags or aluminum trays, then taken home to be baked or simmered in a single pot.

Customers select their dishes online ahead of time. When they show up, they follow recipes that hang over restaurant-style work stations filled with ingredients like frozen chicken breasts, chopped onions and jars of seasonings.

Cheerful workers hover around, carting off measuring spoons as soon as they are dirty and pouring fresh coffee. They encourage the calorie conscious or sodium sensitive to customize meals. And if someone hates broccoli, it can be left out. For people who feel guilty about not cooking for their families, the centers offer absolution in just a couple of hours.

Lisa Johnson, who lives in a suburb of Raleigh, N.C., especially hates shopping and cleanup. But she is determined to keep the family together at the table, at least occasionally. She became a meal assembly convert after just one visit.

"We're always hearing that eating dinner together is the cure for obesity, learning disorders, drugs, divorce and every kind of problem we have in society," she said. "But what no one tells you is how to do all that cooking."

Although women still do 80 percent of the food-related work at home, the amount of time Americans spend cooking dinner has declined to about 30 minutes from about two and a half hours since the 1960's, according to market research by Mintel International and the NPD Group. At the same time, the country is showing signs of restaurant fatigue. Spending in restaurants, which had been growing steadily since World War II, has been flat since 2001.

Meal assembly centers are not necessarily a return to the home-cooked food generations grew up eating. For one, no one actually cooks at them. The chopped vegetables and frozen meats at most of the centers come from industrial food suppliers like Sysco, and recipes include ingredients like canned wax beans and that old hot dish standby, cream of chicken soup. Nothing is cooked on site, although workers in the back room may chop scallions or slice raw beef into serving sizes.

But it may be a start.

"With every generation, fewer and fewer girls -- and boys -- are growing up hanging around the kitchen," said Laura Shapiro, who writes about modern cooking in America. "But the incredible popularity of cooking shows on TV shows that people are hungry to cook, hungry to be in the kitchen."

Even an "assembled" family meal will always be more meaningful than takeout because of the physical connection between the cook, the food and the family, said Bradd Shore, director of the Emory Center on Myth and Ritual in American Life.

"When a mother says, 'Do you like my lasagna?' that is much more loaded than, 'Do you like the lasagna?' " Dr. Shore said. "The fact that she made it with her hands is powerful."

Mayra Didomenico, a mother of two and a pharmacist, just wants to save time and money.

"Every week I go to the supermarket and spend \$200 and I still have to cook it," she said as she filled bags with frozen marmalade-glazed pork chops at a new Super Suppers store in Bethpage, N.Y.

So why not just buy frozen food? "At least here I am seeing the ingredients," she said.

In addition to dinner, the centers offer a kind of canned camaraderie.

"People are looking for a communal feeling, whether it's around a table eating together or in a storefront measuring food into little bags with their friends," said Marc Halperin, director of the Center for Culinary Development in San Francisco, which develops products for clients including Kellogg's and Starbucks.

Meal assembly centers often encourage customers to attend with friends, drink wine while they "cook" and even dance, as a set of couples did on a recent night at Super Suppers in Bethpage.

"They turned off the music, pulled out a big-screen TV and we all watched 'American Idol,' " said Evan Glass, a construction company executive.

Stephanie Allen, who helped found Dream Dinners in the Seattle area in 2002, says her customers first come in with friends, but after two or three visits return alone. "They want to get in and get out and get their dinners done," Ms. Allen said. "They can say, this is something I made, I can have my in-laws over to dinner, and I won't get a hard time from them."

As long as the in-laws are not food critics. Some of the nation's most experienced cooking professionals who attended a food panel recently at New York University had never heard of meal preparation centers. Once it was explained, they expressed disdain.

"People basically don't want to cook but they don't want to be told they are not cooking," said Madhur Jaffrey, the Indian cookbook author and actor. "It's an illusion."

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