

HOME & FAMILY

A New Way to Get a Home-Cooked Meal

Kitchens Away From Home Let Busy People Assemble Ready-to-Freeze Meals

By EILEEN GUNN

Sitting down to a home-cooked meal every night would be nice – if only it didn't take so much time to prepare.

A host of new companies around the country offer a time-saving compromise: come into their storefront kitchen, where all the ingredients and recipes are ready and waiting, and make a big batch of from-scratch meals that you package up, take home and freeze until you're ready to roast, simmer or stir-fry them later.

The services, which charge roughly \$15 to \$25 for a main course that feeds four to six adults (not including side dishes you need to make yourself at home), are too pricey to replace home cooking altogether. But they're cheaper than ordering a nourishing takeout dinner for a whole family, and they give consumers more control over the type of ingredients in their food.

Dream Dinners Inc. in Snohomish, Wash., is credited with creating the away-from-home meal-preparation concept in 2002. The trend has grown, and now there are an estimated 217 such companies with around 566 stores in the U.S. and Canada, according to the Easy Meal Press Association in Cheyenne, Wyo., a trade group that provides services for some of these stores and has a directory on its web site, www.easymealprep.com.

To find out how the meal-preparation stores work – and if the dinners pass a basic test – we sent out testers in different parts of the country. Despite wanting to tweak recipes and finding better ways to package and transport the meals, and perhaps see menus that are a little less meat-centric, we were generally satisfied with our experiences. The process was smooth, the ingredients were of decent quality and the meals tasted homemade. We'd even use some dishes as shortcuts for dinner parties.

At all the stores we tried the owners were attentive, keeping ingredients replenished and work areas clean. They helped customers split recipes into smaller meals and to adjust seasonings for bold or finicky palates.

Here's how it typically works: You sign up for a scheduled session and choose meals from a list either online or when you arrive. When you show up at the scheduled time, you don an apron and disposable kitchen gloves and claim a shelf in one of several refrigerators to stash your meals as you make them. Stations are set up with recipes and all the prepped ingredients for a particular dish.

You pour a premeasured portion of meat or fish into a mixing bowl or, easier still, the aluminum pan or Ziploc bag you'll carry it home in, then add your other ingredients. Containers filled with chopped onions or garlic, soy sauce or chicken broth, and herbs and spices have scoops that reflect the amounts called for in the recipes, making the

process fairly glitch-proof. Each finished package is labeled with cooking instructions and some times suggested side dishes.

Because you don't need to shop for ingredients, wash and chop the vegetables and meat, or clean up, each meal takes only five to 10 minutes to make. A working parent with an overscheduled family – the target customer for these services – can assemble eight dishes in 90 minutes, then pluck a homemade meal from the freezer on nights when there isn't time to cook from scratch at home.

Dream Dinners, Simply Cook It Inc and One Two Three Dinner each offered classic family dinners, often with an updated twist (such as pesto-cheddar meatloaf at Simply Cook It). They mixed those in with toned-down versions of trendy ethnic fare (Dream Dinner's arroz con pollo) and a few lighter options (One Two Three Dinner's salmon burgers).

Designed Dinners had a slightly more adventurous menu. Tuna steaks were in a wasabi marinade, and the green salsa on our enchiladas had a serious kick. Dinner Dr. had traditional American options like chicken pot pie, baked chicken and six-layer taco casserole.

The environmentally conscious might cringe over all the disposable pans and plastic bags you go through in a single session. The stores say the packaging is partially a response to health codes that are stricter than for restaurants because customers are carrying away prepped but uncooked food, and they point out that the aluminum pans are recyclable.

Most places charge a flat fee for five to 15 meals. Entrees with pricier items, like salmon or steak, seemed like a better value than those with pasta or chicken. Dream Dinners prices its meals a la carte, but your tab could vary by as much as \$25, depending on the dishes you choose, so we preferred the no-surprises aspect of the flat fee.

In general, the meals are meant to be kid-friendly. Chicken, cheese and ground beef make frequent appearances. Spicing is generally mild and cooking directions tend toward well-done meat. Seafood options were generally limited, and vegetarian entrees were few and far between.

These meals aren't as complete as some store-bought frozen dinners would be. You do have to cook them and not simply heat then up, improvising along the way. Also, customers need to think about how to transport and store all the meals – squeezing four or five baking pans into a freezer is no small feat. Some stores recommend cleaning out your freezer before visiting and bringing a cooler to keep food chilled on the way home. A cooler also keeps the food contained should anything spill in the car (we had a vinegary marinade leak from a poorly packed aluminum pan.) -*Emily Cronk, Jane Hodges and Sarah Tilton contributed to this article.*

COMPANY	COST/MEALS	CONVENIENCE FATOR	TASTE TEST	COMMENT
Dream Dinners Belmont, Calif.	\$131; six entrees	It was easy to season recipes to our taste, and cooking directions were foolproof.	The chicken in three dishes was moist when cooked, while vegetables stayed crunchy.	The menu was broad enough that it was easy to pick six appealing dishes. Organic choices would have been nice.
Designed Dinners Seattle	\$145; eight entrees	A quiche required too much at-home prep. But we used the marinades that came with several entrees to flavor our side dishes.	Some dishes were zesty-perhaps too much so for kids-while others were underseasoned.	Fish and meat-free options, along with free wine and cheese at the store, were nice touches.
Dinner Dr. Hopkins, Minn.	\$128; 12 entrees	We were the only ones at our session, assuring plenty of guidance from the owner.	A shrimp dish and a baked chicken dish were flavorful. The code was well-seasoned but a bit chewy.	The kitchen facilities were spotless, the ingredients were fresh and the prices seemed reasonable.
Simply Cook It Mount Olive, NJ	\$149; eight entrees	Splitting some dishes into two portions was easier said than done without help. Cooking times were too long on chicken dishes.	Seasonings were ample enough to satisfy adults without scaring off the kids.	The owners were attentive-down to carrying a large box of meals to our car for us.
1-2-3 Dinner Briarcliff Manor, NY	\$104; three entrees, one side dish, one soup, one cake	Walk-in sessions with no minimum purchase offered flexibility, as did a selection of soups, side dishes and desserts.	Dishes were well seasoned and light on salt, but never spicy. We added more garlic to skirt steak.	The priciest of the group, but the menu ranged from family meal standbys to dinners we'd happily serve guests.