

FEBRUARY 2003

WORKING MOTHER

THE SMART GUIDE FOR A WHOLE LIFE

**MOM VS. STEPMOM:
GIVE PEACE
A CHANCE**

**STOP THAT!
GOOD KIDS,
BAD HABITS**

**BEYOND
SWEATS:
WEEKEND
CHIC**

**NEWS FLASH:
THIS IS YOUR BRAIN.
THIS IS YOUR BRAIN
ON KIDS.**

how to **play** with your food

**Two Seattle entrepreneurs
are cooking up dinner
(and a little dish)**

Stephanie Firchau
and Tina Kuna

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Hair and Makeup, Amanda Stansfield for Celestine Seattle
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can cooking dinner really make you this happy?

"WHAT'S FOR SUPPER, MOM?"

IT'S A QUESTION THAT STRIKES FEAR IN THE HEARTS OF WOMEN EVERY NIGHT OF THE WEEK. NOW THERE'S A PLACE IN SEATTLE WHERE YOU CAN MAKE A MONTH'S WORTH OF MEALS IN TWO HOURS FLAT—AND HAVE FUN DOING IT. COME ON OVER TO DREAM DINNERS AND MEET THE WOMEN WHO MAKE IT COOK.

It's 7:30 p.m., and the commercial kitchen on Eighth Avenue West in Everett, Washington, a Seattle suburb, is buzzing. Shania Twain croons through the loudspeakers. Forty pounds of prawns, 60 pounds of chicken, ten pounds of celery, and other assorted fixings are at the ready in stainless-steel containers. And 12 aproned women stand at their workstations, pouring, dolloping, whisking, and schmoozing, as their conversations bounce from counter to counter: "Does your son like first grade?" "How was work today?" "Where's the garlic salt?"

Welcome to a Thursday night session of Dream Dinners, Inc., an ingenious meal-preparation service where the workers are also the customers. It's

BY JENNIFER GILL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEBRA McCLINTON

Dream Dinners
cofounders
Stephanie Firchau (left)
and Tina Kuna



the brainchild of Stephanie Firchau and Tina Kuna, two friends who have figured out the answer to a key conundrum of twenty-first-century family life: How do you prepare home-style meals for your family when you can't even find time to go grocery shopping? At Dream Dinners, Firchau and Kuna meet you halfway. They create the menus, order the ingredients and do most of the slicing, dicing and chopping for you. Then they invite you over to one of their well-equipped kitchens to put the entrees together in an atmosphere that is equal parts food prep and gab fest.

Talk about your secret sauce. Put in a couple hours of chat, instruction and ingredients assembly, and then head home with enough ready-to-cook entrees to feed a family three dinners a week for a month—and all for just under \$150. We're not talking tuna-noodle casserole, either. How about herb-crusted flank steak, lemon-garlic chicken and spicy paella? These meals would pass muster with serious foodies. And "this is about more than creating food," says Firchau. "I see people become friends every night. That's the real excitement. We're creating community."

Community indeed. Started just a year ago, today Dream Dinners has three kitchens in the Seattle area and can accommodate as many as 1,800 customers a month, who assemble and take home some 21,600 dinners. The company attracts its share of singles and empty nesters, but most of the customers are working moms.

It all started with one of those time-worn working-mother strategies known to the more organized of the species: You double or triple a recipe, cook it in one afternoon, then freeze what you don't use for later on in the week. With luck, that's one or two nights off from takeout, frozen pizza and chicken nuggets. But Firchau and a friend had taken that strategy up a notch. They'd meet monthly in one of their homes in Snohomish, a suburb of Seattle, and prepare a month's worth of meals in a single day. Firchau's smart twist? Instead of cooking each entree—meatloaf for eight, say—and then freezing it, a method that is efficient but cuts down on taste, the women did all of the

prep work and then froze the mostly uncooked entrees so they'd be ready to complete later as needed. The result, says Firchau, a self-described "food snob," was freezers full of premium, ready-to-cook meals—and liberation from that most dreaded of daily chores: scrambling home after work to pull together a wholesome, toothsome dinner for the family.

Firchau's method was legendary among her circle of friends, who had been angling (and angling and angling) for years to get in on her little dinner parties. Finally, sick of the whining, Firchau decided to give in. She blasted an email to a dozen friends inviting them to a "Girls' Night Out" in the kitchen. "Bring your pans, a bottle of wine, and we'll have fun," she instructed. She would provide the recipes and take care of getting the ingredients so that everyone could make 12 of her freezer-ready dinners, each big enough for a family of six. All they had to do was cover the cost of the food.

That's when the deluge began. Within days, all 12 friends had not only signed up but had forwarded her email to all of their friends. Soon Firchau was fielding calls from strangers miles away, inquiring about her "dinner club," and checks started piling up on her desk at home.

Firchau, a former co-owner of a catering firm, was an ace around a cutting board but clueless with a calculator. So she called up Tina Kuna, a longtime friend she had once worked with in another business, to help sort out the logistics. Neither felt right turning anyone away. So they arranged a schedule, rented a commercial kitchen for four nights and, last March, walked 44 grateful cooks through the assembly process. What started out as a lark had quickly morphed into a nascent business.

Late one night, after the last class had gone and the two women were up to their elbows in soapsuds, Firchau and Kuna started fantasizing about where they could take this. Kuna's first request was basic: a kitchen of their own so they wouldn't have to haul supplies in and out of a rented one every night. Then Firchau posed a grander ambition: a string of kitchens—across the country! "Tina started giggling," Firchau recalls. "She was buying into it, too. It's two o'clock in the morning, we're doing dishes,

we've been up fifteen hours. My mind just started creating."

So they decided to dig in. Factoring in food costs, payroll and other overhead expenses, they figured they could afford \$1,000 in rent a month—not much of a budget for the pricey Seattle suburbs. Many places they saw were either too expensive or not well located. Then, in April, Firchau walked into the 1,000-square-foot storefront in Everett, sandwiched between a dog-grooming shop and a kayak store. At \$1,300 a month, the place nearly fit their budget, and the



1. Tina Kuna briefs a new customer on her choice of 12 entrees.



2. Customers measure out ingredients at workstations around the kitchen.



3. Forget chopping, slicing and dicing. Dream Dinners does the prep work for you, so there's plenty of time to catch up with old friends—or make new ones.



4. The finished product, ready to wrap, go, and fill your freezer.



5. Two hours later, a laundry basket full of meals—and no kitchen to clean up.

landlord, eager to lease the space, offered Firchau and Kuna several months' free rent. They took it. By May, they had incorporated the business and were holding two sessions a week.

Today, Dream Dinners is running in the black. And as the company expands, Firchau and Kuna feel a sense of mission. If that seems too strong a word for it, consider this: Many of the people who attend the Dream Dinners sessions grew up in homes where Mom served dinner every night and the family sat down not just for sustenance but for conversation

and even socialization. In their way, Firchau and Kuna are working to "duplicate that lost Eden of a home-cooked meal," says Barbara Haber, author of *From Hardtack to Home Fries: An Uncommon History of American Cooks and Meals* (Free Press). If Eden can't be recreated in toto—and most working mothers wouldn't want it to be—Dream Dinners helps provide a reasonable facsimile. Kuna isn't shy about their ambitions: "We want to help people out and maybe affect their home life for the better. I feel like we're changing people's lives."

Another lost feature of American family life—real or imagined—is the backfence or front-stoop network, spontaneous and informal, that women once enjoyed. Dream Dinners provides something of that, too, as the women at the counters gab and commiserate with girlfriends they either come with or end up meeting at the monthly sessions. "It's our social hour," says Stacey Pedersen, 33, one evening as she works on a coconut prawn dish. An apparel buyer for Nordstrom and the mother of a 10-month-old son, Pedersen says she used to blow at

least \$80 a week on takeout before she became a Dream Dinners regular.

Her friend Michelle Corsi, a lawyer, says she rang up similar expenses, and when she did try the home-cooked route, it wasn't easy. "I worked all day in the office, then went to work in the kitchen," says Corsi, 33 and mother of a 19-month-old son, sealing a container of paella. "I felt like a slave. I didn't have time to just play with my son."

Family food consumption has also improved for Margie Gradwohl, 34, a manager at Microsoft and mother of one. "My husband says he's never eaten better in his life," she reports, dribbling apricot preserves onto a bed of pork chops and cornbread stuffing. In life before Dream Dinners, she recalls, "I was known for boiling everything. Dinner was boring ravioli with sauce or takeout from the teriyaki place, where they knew my daughter by name." Now she and girlfriend Errin Shull, 34, a phys-ed teacher and mother of three, arrange a night out together, to cook dinner. It usually works without a hitch—except for the time Shull made two

meals of Chicken Siciliana, one for her and one for Gradwohl—and forgot to add the chicken. "I must have got to talking," she laughs.

For Kuna, 39, a married mother of three, and Firchau, 40, a single mom with two children, the number of quiet dinners at home has actually declined. Most nights, they are on site in one of their kitchens. During the day they're engaged in other business-building activities. Transforming that first empty storefront in Everett into a sleek, efficient kitchen wound up costing them about \$50,000. Firchau and Kuna invested about \$20,000 of their own money and financed the rest with profits they

had already cleared. To streamline the registration process, Kuna created the DreamDinners.com website, where customers can see each month's menu and sign up for the 12 they want to make. Firchau, meanwhile, has arranged a lease-to-own contract for the kitchen equipment and a contract for food through SYSCO, a national wholesale food distributor that she worked with during her years as a caterer.

It's been an exhausting year, but Firchau and Kuna seem to be having as much fun as their clients do. When they're leading a cooking session, Kuna greets customers as they come into the kitchen while Firchau flits about, replenishing ingredients and chatting with newcomers. Their experience co-managing a dental practice years ago, they say, taught them the importance of strong customer service, as well as the art of providing it. "Customers are never wrong. We never tell someone, 'You can't make the recipe that way,'" Firchau says. "We say, 'Let me show you a way that might work better.'"

Is there a national chain of Dream (CONTINUED ON PAGE 76)



A DAUGHTER'S DISH ON THE SIDE

If there's a gene that marks entrepreneurs, it must be woven into the Firchau family DNA.

Last spring, Karlene Bridgeman-Firchau, Stephanie's 16-year-old daughter, discovered a niche of consumers that her mom's new company wasn't tapping: people who love Dream Dinners but can't make it to a monthly assembly session. The high school junior got inspired after she volunteered to make and deliver meals to a family friend who was eight months

pregnant. Karlene realized she could sell the service to other busy women. She persuaded her mom and Kuna to let her start her own assemble-and-deliver service.

Orders rolled in immediately, and Karlene now averages ten to 12 deliveries a week. She charges \$50 for the service, on top of the usual \$147 fee, bringing in as much as \$600 a week. It's a big project for someone who has French homework and history papers to write. So last fall, Karlene hired two friends to help—and soon confronted her first management crisis: One friend quit, complaining about the pay.

"I don't know where else she thinks she can make nine dollars an hour," Karlene huffs, showing proper entrepreneurial indignation. She pulled long hours in the kitchen to keep orders on track—and hired another friend.

Karlene's week includes two or three trips to the kitchen to assemble meals, at times when the place isn't full of customers. That way, Karlene and her mom have time alone to dish. On alternate days, she picks up orders and makes deliveries.

Some of Karlene's loot is earmarked for college; years of babysitting have piqued an interest in child psychology. A portion covers expenses for her meals-on-wheels-mobile, a 1994 Volkswagen. And now and then she splurges: She recently treated herself to a day at a spa. Of course, there are times when Karlene would rather hang out with friends after school. But the payoff comes every time she rings a customer's doorbell to deliver an order. "People get so excited when they see me," she says. "They hug me and tell me that they don't argue over dinner anymore."—JG