

At one of the new "meal-assembly" stores, you can put together two weeks' worth of suppers to freeze and serve later. The best part: no shopping, chopping or cleanup required. BY IRENE SAX

Jennifer Duncan says Super Suppers has transformed her life. The 34-year-old mother of three goes to the franchise kitchen in Plano, Texas, once a month and walks away with 12 dinners bound for the freezer. "Before, if I didn't have dinner started, we would just go out. Now that we eat at home most nights, our family dynamic has changed completely," says Jennifer. "The homework gets done, the kids go to bed earlier and we're not as tired."

Super Suppers is the brainchild of Judie Byrd, a Fort Worth cooking teacher. "A mom or dad can spend an hour or two with us and assemble a dozen delicious meals," she says. After selecting their entrees on the company's Web site, participants go to a commercial kitchen as one of nearly 170 locations. There, each person moves between prep stations where ingredients have been chipped, sliced and diced and are ready to be put together in pans or freezer bags. "Our customers say it's like having gold in the freezer."

A cross between a cooking class and a girl's night out, the concept is catching on. According to the Easy Meal Prep Association, there are more than 200 companies and about 600 outlets. Cooks in all but eight states have at least one option, from single stores like Chat N Cook in Yuma, Arizona, to My Girlfriend's Kitchen with locations from Virginia to Utah. And new venues, supported by loyal clients, keep on appearing.

More than 1.5 million people have eaten Dream Dinners since April 2002, when Seattle caterer Stephanie Allen realized she was making dinner for everyone but her own family and got together with her pal Tina Kuna for a marathon cook-and-freeze session. They had such fun that they invited others to join them; after a few months they launched a company that now has 160 franchises. "The moms enjoy getting together," says Stephanie, "and go home feeling good because they're taking care of their families."

Prices vary, but 12 dinners for a family of four to six usually start at around \$200. Participants say it's worth it. They don't go out to eat as often, and since they're making fewer trips to the supermarket, they're making fewer impulse purchases.

"I know it's cheaper," says Debra Johnson, 35, a home-schooling mother of two from Snohomish, Washington, who has been using Dream Dinners since it began. "But that's not the best part. Despite our busy schedules, we all eat together every night. You can't beat that."