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Stephanie Allen and Tina Kuna,
Dream Dinners Owners

DREAM DINNERS


Two Local Ladies Offer Food for Thought

After an eight-hour work day, you pick up the kids from tee ball practice and dance lessons. You're anxious to get home, feed the family and relax. But staring you in the face is the thought of another hour spent preparing a meal for everyone. You just don't have the time – or energy – for that. Defeated by the groans of hunger coming from your ever-growing children, you pull into the drive-thru and shell out a quick \$25 for a couple thousand calories for you, your spouse and your kids.

Two local women are doing their best to encourage moms and dads to drive past the drive-thru and head home for dinner. Two local women took an idea about convenience and turned it into a multi-million dollar nationwide phenomenon. Stephanie Allen and Tina Kuna are the owners of Dream Dinners, a company designed to allow you to hold onto valuable time at and relieve you of the stressful thoughts surrounding dinner preparation. The idea is Dream Dinners can supply families with up to a month's worth of dinners comprised of fresh, flash-frozen ingredients. Customers easily prepare meals ahead of time and can keep their ready-to-cook meals in the freezer. >>

BY ETHAN CHUNG | PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE JAMES





Entree prices range
from \$8 to \$28. Menus
vary. Find out more
about the Dream
Dinners on the Web at
dreamdinners.com



Kuna says Dream Dinners franchises are now in 37 states and stores are dishing up a million servings per month. Families are eating real dinner instead of chicken nuggets or pizza.

the dream continues

Allen and Kuna have traveled a long road with Dream Dinners in a very short time. “When we started Dream Dinners, our sessions were held in the little catering kitchen, admin would be at homes and dining rooms, but as we grew, Stephanie offered her house space, they had a ‘barn’ on the property, and that’s where our home office began. Stephanie had her home available to trainees. It was a neat experience for new people, it was like camp, and by the end of the week, they had a huge connection, says Kuna. “Not only were trainees there for training but it turned into a growth and bonding experience.”

Dream Dinners opened their new headquarters in downtown Snohomish in 2004, complete with a recipe test-kitchen and corporate training facility. The ladies wanted to make sure they kept family a top priority, and one of the interesting additions to the headquarters was a playground for employees’ children. Also on the property is “The Dream House,” a four-bedroom home that serves as a bed-and-breakfast for new franchise owners undergoing the training process.

While Dream Dinners’ success has skyrocketed over the past few years, Allen and Kuna have navigated through many challenges. “Hiring the right people is key ... we have to hire the people who have skills that we need, or skills that we might not possess. And that’s been tricky, because we essentially created an industry when we started. We didn’t have anyone to learn and grow from at the very beginning. Six years later we are still learning, still growing, facing challenges from competition, economy, high food costs,” says Allen. >>

how the dream began

Dream Dinners didn’t really start out as a business, just a group of moms sharing resources. Allen owned a successful catering business, catering six to eight events per week. “I could feed half of Western Washington, but found that I was struggling to get dinner on my own table every night,” she says. There was a down-swing in business after Sept. 11, so as a way to make some extra money and help her friends out, Allen decided to get them involved. Once a month, Allen hosted a group of her friends in her catering kitchen. She would send out a menu with 14 choices, asking her friends to pick 12. They’d send checks ahead of time for ingredients. “We’d get a few bottles of wine, hang out and make dinners,” she said.

After several sessions, Kuna, a long-time friend of Allen’s, saw potential to develop their gatherings into a business. With three kids, a husband working graveyard at Boeing, soccer practices and guitar lessons, she was also struggling to get dinner on the table.

“By March 2002, 44 women had gone through our system – by April, 120. We grew every month after that. We received emails from out of state people who were friends with ladies who had attended our dinner-making parties. They were asking for help. Eventually, we never looked back,” says Kuna.



425 locations

Issaquah: 1640 N.W. Gilman Blvd., Suite B-5, 425.392.3636

Mill Creek: 15021 Main St., Suite G, 425.316.8260

Woodinville: 13432 N.E. 177th Pl./ Little Bear Creek Pkwy., 425.486.1808

Dream Dinners also has stores in these Washington cities: Auburn, Bellingham, Covington, Kennewick, Lacey, Poughkeepsie, Seattle, Shoreline, Spokane and Vancouver.

Other places to get your assembly meal fix in Washington

- Beam for Life – beamforlife.com
- Dinner's Ready – dinnerready.com
- Dinners Done Right – dinnersdoneright.com
- Designed Dinners – designeddinners.com
- Let's Dish! – letsdish.com

it's all about community, eating together

But Kuna maintains the obstacles faced were all worth the work. "It's constantly very rewarding. We started this business to help friends and we receive e-mails from customers about how much Dream Dinners changed their lives. That's what keeps us going," she says. Kuna reflects on a family who came to their Bellingham store, and their 16-year-old son was having some struggles with being overweight. Since his family became focused on eating dinner together with Dream Dinners, he has taken his health seriously, and has lost 60 pounds with diet and exercise.

The ladies explain their dinners shouldn't be considered diet food, but their meals are low to nonfat. All their foods are consistent, whether at a Dream Dinners in Florida, New Hampshire, Ohio or Washington. It's all family fare, and not necessarily high-end food, but high quality. Both Kuna and Allen swear by their products. They are busier now than they ever have been, and both families eat Dream Dinners quite frequently.

Dream Dinners has received high marks from Forbes, The New York Times, Time magazine, Redbook, The Wall Street Journal and Reader's Digest, and Allen and Kuna were named the Ernst & Young's 2006 Pacific Northwest Entrepreneur of the Year for Consumer Products. While the business has changed Allen and Kuna's lives for the better, the ladies remain devoted to changing their customers' lives. This philosophy of changing lives is the cornerstone of their business – Dream Dinners meets busy customers halfway, creating viable meal options to take home so they can focus on their families. **2006**