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No-hassle home cooking

Busy families look to traveling chefs and packaged meals

Ursula Watson / The Detroit News

Guess who's cooking dinner? Well, probably not you.

Surveys say that nearly half of working Americans rely on fast food or other high-fat takeout.

The number of Americans sitting down for dinner with their partner and/or children almost every day is around 41 percent, according to figures compiled by Rose Duignan of Oakland, Calif., who is finishing work toward a master's degree in business at the Berkeley-Columbia executive program. Only 8 percent of surveyed adults say they or their partner spend more than seven hours a week (averaging an hour a day) cooking dinner.

A growing number of Americans are finding healthier alternatives to fast food thanks to commercial services that offer packaged meals that go from the freezer to the oven or microwave and to the dinner table, such as Super Suppers in Berkley, Dream Dinners (with multiple locations) and the Original Wandering Gourmet in Warren owned by chef Dan Engel and his wife, Elizabeth.

Engel, 36, says 70 percent of his customers lack the time to prepare a home-cooked meal. "Many are parents with kids involved with sports and other activities or both parents are working," he says. "Who has the time?"

Romantic meals, casual catering and dinner parties are part Engel's business and prices vary depending on his customer's needs. Generally, package meals start at \$275 for a week's worth of meals for two adults.

Like a culinary savior, Engel heads to the grocery store, brings the proverbial bacon home to his customer, fries it up in the pan, and packages and labels up to a month's worth of meals.

And, he cleans up, too.

No need to worry about eating meatloaf every Tuesday. Engel has 300 recipes, such as blue cheese burgers, spring vegetable paella and almond crusted tilapia at his fingertips. Plus, he cooks up dishes to the needs and wants of his customers.

"I always say, if the customer wants us to wear a purple hat," Engel says, "you wear a purple hat." If a customer eats only vegetarian or has specific health requirements, Engel's serves them all.

Jennifer Johnson of Oakland Township says Engel appeases the finicky palate of her husband, Chad, 33.

Johnson, also 33, says she and Chad are busy raising two small children and running several

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Ricardo Thomas / The Detroit News
Jennifer Johnson has chef Dan Engel of the Original Wandering Gourmet prepare 30 meals every two weeks. [See full image](#)

Don't do it yourself

The Original Wandering Gourmet

Chef Dan Engel and his wife pick up your groceries, bring the food to your home and cook it for you.

For information, call (586) 212-1599 or visit

<http://www.personalchefmi.com/>

What's on the menu?

Florentine sun-dried tomato strudel with red pepper sauce

Moroccan lemon chicken with chick pea and cilantro couscous

Sesame-crusting tuna with wasabi mayonnaise and new potato tomato salad

A 10-meal package starts at \$275

Super Suppers

2758 Coolidge Highway, Berkley
(248) 336-9174

There are six other locations in Michigan. Visit www.supersuppers.com for more information

What's on the menu?

Asian grilled flank steak

Marmalade-glazed pork chops

Citrus chicken with peachy pineapple sauce

A 12-meal package (serving 4-6 people) starts at \$195

Dream Dinners

33591 Seven Mile, Livonia
(248) 477-8300

There are four other locations in Michigan. Visit dreamdinners.com for more information

What's on the menu?

Salmon with creamy lemon and herb sauce

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businesses. Engel comes to their home every two weeks and makes 30 meals and puts them in the freezer.

"You figure the time you save, it is worth the cost," she says. "No shopping, no preparation."

Lean cuisine

Sitting down to a healthy meal is just as hard for singles and couples without kids.

Cindy Lapp of Canton Township is single, a proud aunt and a nurse. She owns her own business, working as a case manager coordinating the care of auto accident victims. Lapp admits that choreographing the delicate dance between doctors and patients has led to bad eating habits.

"I am on the go so much that I would pick up fast food and eat restaurant food, which is not healthy."

While Lapp, 48, says she has always been active, her food choices were counterproductive. "The exercise was happening, but not the weight loss."

After hearing about Seattle Sutton's Healthy Eating, in Canton Township, she decided in April to give it a try.

Founded in 1985 by a nurse named Seattle Sutton, this company's prepared meals are designed to help those wanting to lose weight, maintain a healthy weight or address health issues.

After three months of eating the low-calorie, low-sodium meals, Lapp's cholesterol dipped 50 points and there was added bonus. "I have lost 45 pounds and have managed to keep it off," she says.

Headquartered in Illinois, there are 229 Seattle Sutton's distributors in nine states and more than 40 Seattle Sutton's in Michigan.

There are 100 meal selections and prices vary, depending how many meals you want. Lapp says she spends about \$100 per week.

Rita Pydyn, a Seattle Sutton's healthy eating distributor, owns four stores in southeastern Michigan including the one in Canton Township. Pydyn says many of her customers are single or couples without children, which creates its own set of challenges.

"It is so hard to cook and shop for one person," she says. "This way, you are not wasting food because the meals are portioned and calories are controlled."

Wallace Duvall, who owns Seattle Sutton's Michigan production and distribution franchise, says locations prepare 100,000 low-calorie meals each month. It is not a diet, he says, just fresh meats, fruits and vegetables.

"This is what you should be eating anyway," he says. "It is a no-brainer. You don't have to do anything. Just eat."

Have it your way

For those die-hard, do-it-yourselfers who prefer to be in charge of their own culinary destiny, meal assembly kitchens just may be the meal-ticket.

Alicia Sinner, a co-owner of Alicat Kitchens in Wyoming, a suburb of Grand Rapids, says she knows the struggles people face when time is not an option.

Alicat has 15 recipe stations inside the 2,800-square-foot commercial kitchen, stocked with all of the ingredients, pans, cooking utensils, directions and staff on hand if you get stumped. A 12-meal session can range from \$185 to \$200, depending on your menu selection. For customers who would prefer to forgo doing the cooking themselves, Alicat staff will prepare meals.

"It saves me a lot of time, and I don't have to think about it," says Laura Stadler, 40, of Grandville. "It also saves money because you're not walking in the grocery store picking up extra things you don't need."

You can reach Ursula Watson at (313) 222-2613 or uwatson@detnews.com. The San Francisco Chronicle also contributed to this report.

Pasta primavera

Greek beef kabobs

A 12-meal package starts at \$210-220; with an introductory price of 3 dinners for \$49.50

Seattle Sutton's Healthy Eating

42448 Cherry Hill Road, Canton Township

(734) 844-7660

This company has more than 40 locations through Michigan, call (800) 442-3438.

Visit <http://www.seattlesutton.com/>

What's on the menu?

Farm-fresh cheese omelet and pineapple juice

Chicken Alfredo with a veggie medley, low-fat

Alfredo sauce served on a bed of wild rice

Chilled potato, turkey fillet and veggies

The price for 21 1,200-calorie meals is \$112 a week;

and 21 2,000-calories meals is \$133 a week and

includes breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Alicat Kitchens

5751 Byron Center Road, Suite F, Wyoming, Mich.

Call (616) 257-3545 or visit www.alicatkitchens.com

What's on the menu?

Aztec quiche

Hazelnut carbonara

Savory crab cakes

An average 12-dish, full-order session will cost \$185

- \$200.

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