

Give a food gift with a twist -- a chef who comes to you

BY Sylvia Rector FREE PRESS RESTAURANT CRITIC Filed Under Life Lifestyles

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Coconut Macadamia Shrimp from the Original Wandering Gourmet. / Photos by DAVID KILKENNEY/Special to DFP

We think you deserve a little something this holiday season. As part of our 12 Days of Shopping holiday gift guide, the Free Press is giving away some fabulous prizes. Go to freep.com, click on the contests area, enter your contact information on the contest form and you'll be registered to win. Each day, we'll randomly draw from the entries. For official rules and contest details, go to freep.com. Here's what we're giving away each day:

- Start by asking for suggestions from friends who might have hired chefs themselves. Most of the Original Wandering Gourmet's business comes from word-of-mouth recommendations, says company CEO Liz

Engel.

- If you have a favorite chef or caterer, ask them for suggestions. Some might even take the job themselves if the price and job are right. Expect their fees to reflect their experience level.
- Search personal chef associations' Web sites; two sites are www.hireachef.com and www.personalchefsearch.com.
- Call local culinary schools. They might have instructors or even advanced students who could take the job, says chef Kelli Lewton of 2 Unique Caterers and Pure Food 2 U, an organic home-delivered meals company in Royal Oak. A student might save you significant money, but be aware you're hiring a relatively inexperienced person.
- Consider posting your need for an in-home chef on Craig's List, www.craigslist.org, Lewton says. "I have chefs here who are always cruising it," she says. The free online service lists everything from businesses for sale to employment ads.

And remember: Before hiring someone to come into your home and cook for your guests, ask for references from recent previous clients. Don't assume that a chef's membership in a professional organization is a guarantee you'll like their work.

Sylvia Rector

Ah, the steak house gift certificate -- the all-purpose fallback present when we want to give a really nice gift but can't think what to buy.

It's not a terrible choice -- everyone loves food, after all.

But Holy Porterhouse, how unimaginative!

This year, instead of sending your special someone to a restaurant, why not send a chef to his or her door?

For about what you might pay for dinner for two at a top restaurant, you can hire a creative, white-coated

chef to prepare and serve a romantic candlelit dinner in their own home.

The recipients pick a date and work with the chef to choose a menu. Then the chef does the shopping, arrives at the home with all the necessary equipment, cooks and serves the meal, cleans up and leaves the satisfied diners to enjoy their afterglow.

It's an experience most people have never had. And it's one they won't soon forget.

"I burst into tears, it was such a surprise. It was overwhelming," said Christina Salatrik of Clinton Township, whose husband surprised her with dinner for the two of them, prepared by personal chef Dan Engel of the Original Wandering Gourmet in Warren. The [business](#)

is a family affair; his wife, Liz Engel, is CEO of the 4-year-old company.



"It was so nice. It wasn't rushed at all. He did appetizers and a salad, and dinner and dessert. It was perfect," Salatrik said.

Unlike restaurant chefs, personal chefs cook in customers' homes, typically coming in for a day to prepare and freeze several days' or weeks' worth of dinners for the household.

But their services are far more varied and interesting than that.

Much of their work involves planning, cooking for and serving at in-home dinner parties of all sizes and styles, from the kind of romantic dinner Michael Salatrik staged for his wife to cocktail parties for 100.

One popular theme is the in-home cooking class, where the chef turns that night's dinner preparations into a cooking lesson for the group. Depending on what the host prefers, guests can sip wine and watch the action or join in to learn a new technique or recipe.

Some customers, like Amy Guzzardo of Shelby Township, want to create a special experience for their guests -- as well as being able to enjoy their own event without worrying about cooking and serving.

She hired Dan Engel earlier this month to cook for a party for 11 of her longtime friends.

"We're all busy with our own lives, but we made a pact that we would have at least one Christmas dinner a year that we would never miss," she said. "We've been doing it for 32 years, and we all take turns hosting. Sometimes it's at a restaurant."

But Guzzardo, who owns a florist service, wanted her event to be "a little more private and a little bit different. I thought I'd love to entertain at the house, but I didn't know where to find a good gourmet chef."

Her administrative assistant went to work on the problem and found Engel [online](#)

at www.personalchefmi.com.



He's just one of 17 personal chefs listed within 60 miles of Detroit on www.hireachef.com, a Web site operated by the United States [Professional](#)

Chef Association.



The American Personal & Private Chef Association lists 22 members in Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Monroe and Washtenaw counties on www.personalchefsearch.com. Engel says preparing home-cooked

meals for families, professional couples, people with special dietary needs and elderly people remains the largest part of his business.

As a gift, a week's worth of professionally prepared, nutritious dinners might not sound as exciting as, say, a gift certificate for a murder-mystery dinner party. But it can be perfect for people who have trouble cooking for themselves.

"It's a wonderful gift for parents and the elderly -- especially the elderly, because it's so difficult to cook for just one person," he says. And because the meals are substantial, "a 20-meal package would last a single person a whole month."

Personal chefs' fees vary. They're typically more expensive than restaurant meals, but the food and service comes with advantages: They're all customized for the [client](#)

, prepared in the customer's own kitchen, and designed and packaged for easy, successful reheating.

Engel charges \$325 for a 10-meal package, which includes 10 entrees and 10 sides, plus extras like salads and homemade bread or perhaps dessert. However, just \$50 more buys a 20-meal package, he notes.

Prices start at \$200 for "a very nice, romantic dinner for two," says Liz Engel. "They're very popular. We do pretty well with gift certificates," she adds.

The price includes appetizer, salad, entrée, side vegetable and dessert. "We help them plan a menu. We shop, cook, serve and clean up, and we bring our own equipment," she says.

Personal chefs can serve alcohol at a party, but it must be purchased by the host at a licensed retailer. That represents a substantial savings over the cost of buying drinks in a bar or restaurant.

To Michael Salatrik, the surprise dinner he arranged was worth every penny. He was going out of town on a hunting trip with his wife's father -- on her birthday. She wasn't very happy about the timing, even though she wanted them to go.

But when she came home from work and saw a table set in front of the fireplace with china and candles, all was forgiven. "It was beautiful," Christina Salatrik said.

In the kitchen, Dan Engel worked like "a well-oiled machine. ... He was such a pleasure to have in our home. And the food was amazing."

Sending someone a chef for an evening "would make an excellent gift for somebody, because right now, everyone who has a job is working so hard and putting in so many hours," she said. "Doing something in your own home is just really enjoyable."

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