

Knives of Glory

The joy of cooking via a personal chef

By Lisa Brody

Imagine coming home from work at the end of a day to a delicious home-cooked meal, without having to stop at two markets to find food that everyone will eat, remembering to swing by the ATM first, and then begin chopping and prep work just as "Dancing With The Stars" is beginning. And that's just Monday night.

There's a secret out there of the very wise, and very well-fed. Some of them are rich, but surprisingly, not everyone who dips into the private pot is, because it's not an exorbitant proposition. These top-secret agents carry their own knives, pots and pans, herbs and spices, and a plethora of fine recipes. They're personal chefs. And they're coming to homes near you.

According to the United States Personal Chef Association (USPCA), a personal chef service specializes in making great meals ideal for family meals or casual entertaining. The service is designed so clients eat healthier meals, have more free time, and enjoy their favorite foods, all prepared at their home.



"A common misconception is that a personal chef service is only for the wealthy. Anyone who has a need to solve the 'what's for dinner?' problem can hire a personal chef," USPCA said. Personal chefs work for busy professionals, seniors, people with special dietary needs, new mothers, busy families, singles, and anyone seeking to improve the quality of their life through creative, fresh and nutritious meals, with the convenience and free time that having someone to shop, cook and create their meals allows them.

A personal chef meets with you first, and discusses your likes, dislikes, food allergies, health needs, and any other dietary concerns, such as diabetes, gluten free, high blood pressure, high cholesterol or cardiac diets, and customizes menus from which you can choose. Most personal chefs will e-mail you your menu choices each week for your review. Don't want mashed potatoes? No problem. Dying for your mom's pot roast? Hand over the recipe. Once the menu has been decided upon, a personal chef does all of the grocery shopping for you. They will purchase the freshest ingredients available, often going to several different stores early on the morning they are preparing your meals.

On the agreed-upon day, most chefs come into your kitchen, with his or her own pots and pans, knives, food preparation devices like Cuisinart or blender, spices and herbs, rags, and containers in which to put your freshly-made meals. The only thing a chef will use of yours is the stove, oven, BBQ (if there is something you enjoy prepared that way), refrigerator and freezer. Unless you have decided to hire a chef on a daily basis, most chefs come once or twice a week, and prepare several days worth of meals at a time. Some must be eaten within a day or two, and are put in the refrigerator; others are frozen, with detailed labeling and reheating instructions, to be enjoyed in the coming days.

Then the chef completely cleans the kitchen, leaving it better than you left it that morning. When you come home, you are welcomed with fragrant aromas, a spotless kitchen, and no decisions about dinner.

Chef Dan Engel of Warren, who operates The Original Wandering Gourmet Personal Chef Service, begins almost every day cooking for a man in downtown Birmingham. He travels throughout the metro Detroit area, helping people enjoy life a little more, and stressing a little less.

"My clientele goes from an 87-year-old woman in Grosse Pointe to a young married couple with three girls in West Bloomfield," said Engel. "No two clients are the same. Some are daily, some are weekly, some are bi-weekly, and some are monthly."

He notes that there are some clients that use him only occasionally, as a treat, and he is given out as a gift certificate for birthdays, anniversaries, wedding gifts, and holiday gifts.

Engel was originally a tool and die maker with American Axle. Sixty-plus hours-a-week of factory work began to grind on him, and a friend told him they had seen a personal chef book at Costco. He didn't find that book, but did discover the USPCA website. He went to Atlanta, took a two-week crash course which focused on running a personal chef business, set up a menu program, learned other necessities, and he began a side business while still at American Axle.

The personal chef bug bit because "I've been cooking since I was 10," he said. "My parents divorced and I couldn't stand Chef Boy R Dee out of the can. I broke out the Betty Crocker cook book, and started cooking. The first thing I made was an omelet. My mom worked afternoons, there was my sister and I, and I started cooking dinner."

Engel said that about a year after he began his personal chef business, he was so busy, he couldn't manage both it and working full-time at American Axle.

"I asked my wife, Liz, if she wanted to handle the business end, and I left American Axle. Now Liz handles the client booking, billing, menu and recipe research, creates client menus, goes with me on in-depth client interviews, and I do the shopping and the cooking," he said. They are so busy, they each have assistants to help them with their end of the business.

"My specialty is my repertoire," said Engel. "I can do thousands of things. You can eat something different every night of the week for years, or you can have the same thing your mom used to make. Some people give me old family recipes. There are no unusual requests. Most people give me their house keys and their garage codes. The only way they know I've been in their house is the aroma I've left behind."

Betty McBride Stratton of Silver Spoon Gourmet of Northville went to personal chef school run by USPCA in 2001 in Rio Rancho, NM, now called Culinary Business Academy, and has been a personal chef ever since.

"I was looking for a home-based business, and saw a newspaper supplement about personal chefs," Stratton said. "I was a tomboy who liked to cook. I saw this article about personal chefs, and my husband said, 'this looks like you.' Restaurant cooks work crazy hours—holidays, nights, weekends. That was't for

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me. This was something where I could choose my hours."

Her training taught her to prepare food in the proper way, and she is a certified serve/safe personal chef. "There are a lot of food-borne illnesses, and when I'm cooking, I'm cooking a lot of food at one time," she said. "You want to make sure you hire someone properly trained in food preparation."

Stratton said most of her customers are busy professional couples, with or without children, senior citizens who no longer want to cook but still prefer to eat in, someone who is disabled or ill, recuperating from surgery, or temporary chef jobs. Besides word-of-mouth, most people discover her through a web search, such as hireachef.com, via USPCA, where they key in their zip code, and find her website, silverspoongourmet.com.

Stratton said she cooks a lot of international cuisine, including Asian, Italian, Middle Eastern, Thai and Mexican foods. She also works with a lot of restricted diets, and said people enjoy her comfort food of pot roast, chicken and dumplings, and meatloaf. "I don't know if there's a kind of food I haven't done," she said. "And I always ask if there are any allergies or things people dislike. I always ask people what they visualize for a meal."

Debbie Cikalo of Farmington Hills began Deb's Dishes Personal three years ago, after seeing a small add for personal chefs in the back of a copy of Cooking Light magazine.

"I was an engineer at Visteon at the time, and they offered a volunteer buyout, which I took. I then went to the Great Lakes Culinary Institute in Traverse City, which is a two-year program," Cikalo said. "I then went to USPCA, and learned about the tricks of the trade, how to market myself, and became certified through them."

Cikalo covers Oakland County, regularly working in Birmingham, as well as other municipalities, cooking fresh serve, all-organic, comfort food, and Middle Eastern food in clients' kitchens. She can do any kind of special diet, she said, having worked with nutritionists for athletes who need to follow specific dietary plans.

"They let me in, and I bring in all of my own equipment. I do the grocery shopping for them, even spices, cook for them on site, and leave instructions for them on how to warm their food up, then I pack my stuff back up and leave their kitchen as clean, or cleaner, than when I got there," she said. "I like to leave a little surprise, like cookies, banana bread, or brownies, when I leave, if their diet so allows, or else a flower, to brighten their day."

Mary Gindhart of Troy was a stay-at-home mom who was looking for a flexible job, and had a passion for cooking.

"I took the USPCA's online culinary class, learning the difference between roasting, braising and sautéing, using knives and other preparatory advice, as well as learning marketing and advertising and how to set up a business," Gindhart said. She opened Cruisin' to Your Kitchen five years ago, and said she spends about 60 percent of her time cooking, and 40 percent on the business end of the business.

Besides cooking Italian, Mexican and homestyle recipes, Gindhart said she cooks a lot of gluten-free, soy-free and dairy-free dishes, which she developed for a client she has whose diet requires that. "It's interesting coming up with dishes that taste good, are varied, and that they don't realize are gluten-free, soy-free, or dairy-free. There are ingredients to substitute," she said. "I'm not a nutritionist, but I can make things healthy. Everything is fresh. I know. I cut it, I prepare it."

While she acknowledges that the recession has impacted recent business, she loves what she is doing, because she said she feels she is helping people eat healthier.

"I'm helping them eat at home. They don't have to worry about tipping a waiter, getting in a car in the cold weather. They're eating healthier than typical restaurant meals, and there are leftovers with me," she said. "People are so busy working, dealing with their kids and after school and evening activities. This way, they come home to a healthy, home-cooked meal."

Gindhart typically comes in and cooks five entrees, with four servings per entree, including all groceries, cooking, packaging and labeling, which costs approximately \$350.

Stratton's service is also all-inclusive, and depending on menu choices, how many meals desired and how many people are being served, costs range from \$275 to \$375.

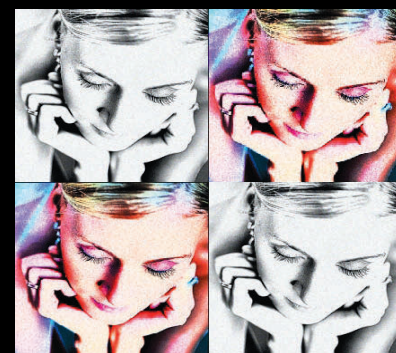
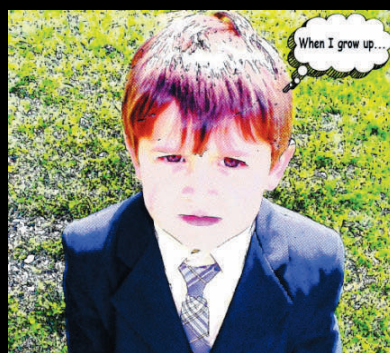
Engel can do anything, he said, but a 20-meal package, which feeds a single person five days a week for a month, or a family of four for a week, runs \$400.

Besides everyday dinners, each of the chefs also do dinner parties and cater large parties, where their imagination is the limit to their creativity.

"The part of my business that is unique is that anything that has to be cooked, can be done," said Engel. "That's the personal part." ■

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