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It's Too Hot to Cook..So Let Someone Else

(from July/August '05)

by Alexandra Holland



Barbie Winstead. Her goal as a chef is to allow people to get through their days without having to worry about dinner.

It's the warmest part of summer, when sticky skin is the norm and a breeze is nowhere to be found. Whipping up something in the kitchen is about as appealing as a run at noon. Even with air conditioning, that heat can suck the life out of you. Yet chances are you won't skip eating all season. The solution: a personal chef service.

Hiring a chef is a sizzling trend among busy professionals, retirees, singles and those who simply disdain cooking.

"I work 60 or 70 hours a week," says Shane, who lives in Craig County. "I don't feel like pulling out stuff and starting from scratch when I get home." Shane's wife is a doctor who "walks through the kitchen four or five times a day – but doesn't know where it is."

"For years, the easiest thing was to go for the 'lowest common denominator,' otherwise known as frozen dinners."

Until Chef Barbie Winstead came along. Chef Barbie rescued Shane and his wife from those high-salt, low-nutrition excuses for food. For the past two years, the personal chef has traveled to their home once a month and whipped up meals that last for weeks.

"It's a match made in heaven," sighs Shane. Now the couple dines on five different types of homemade meatloaves (from mushroom Swiss to Mexican) and twice-baked potatoes. The evening's dinner is ready to eat when they get home from work, and the other entrées and sides frozen and labeled for a quick re-heat another night, or to pop into the lunch bag.

Chef Barbie's Five Star Personal Chef Service (www.pcnchef.com/fivestar) gives clients "an incentive to come home." "Everybody is so busy and so stressed," she explains. "At least they can go through the day not having to worry about dinner."

Customers can pick meals off Barbie's website or have her prepare dishes based on low-carb, low-fat, Atkins, South Beach, Weight Watchers or other dietary preferences.

I visited Chef Barbie while she prepared meals in a South Roanoke home. Coq au vin was

bubbling in the crock-pot and a field salad with snow peas, grapes and feta cheese waited in the refrigerator. Winstead had also prepared sirloin tips with horseradish sauce, green beans with roasted pine nuts, and baked onions with sage and gruyere cheese. In the freezer was flounder with shrimp gravy, a zucchini pancake, and squash boats. Detailed heating instructions were on the counter. Winstead had gone to the grocery store at eight that morning, and was cleaning the kitchen by two in the afternoon. She arrived with a massive blue cooler, her own spices, pots and pans. In a week she would return to fill the fridge.

Chef Barbie's summer specialties include cold soups – gazpacho, vichyssoise, peach, cucumber, and asparagus tarragon. Her most requested dish during any season is black bean and goat cheese enchiladas. "They are vegetarian, yet lots of non-vegetarians request it again and again."

Before cooking for a client, Winstead does a pre-interview covering everything from food allergies to family pets to garlic tolerance. She will cook three to five entrées, each enough to feed four people, plus a starch and vegetable with each entrée (unless it's included in the entrée, e.g., beef stew). Clients can have her come weekly, bi-monthly or monthly. Her most popular plan is three entrées twice a month. This runs \$130 plus groceries (typically \$55-\$75). The average cost comes out to around \$10-\$12 per person – less than the cost of a dinner out.

"And saves so much time and stress," adds Winstead.

Personal Chef Jonathan Kenny, owner of Comfort Cuisine (www.comfortcuisineva.com), agrees. "Once people break it down and realize what their time is worth, they realize they are saving money. They get back their most precious commodity." Jonathan offers three entrées (with four to ten servings per entrée) and one side with each for \$225, including groceries. Price per meal ranges from \$7.50 to \$18.75. Five dishes with sides run \$325. He also gives discounts to regular customers.

Kenny has been serving up his Comfort Cuisine for a couple of years. The majority of Chef Jonathan's clients are professionals, but a large number are retired.

Carol is one such client. The Baltimore native retired to Roanoke 10 years ago. "I was cooking for one. It's hard to do meatloaves and stews for one person." Carol loves Chef Jonathan's brown rice and mushroom soup, spinach stuffed chicken breasts, and curried leg of lamb with cucumber sauce. Jonathan prepares three entrées for her once a month. These translate into 12 meals. She'll eat out or "do a few Lean Cuisines" in between. Carol has even taken her Comfort Cuisine on trips. "I filled a cooler with them when I spent a month in Baltimore."

On the day Chef Jonathan paid a visit to my house, he made three trips to the car, toting in several bags of groceries, a mini-cooler stocked with spice, oils and condiments, as well as his own food processor and knife. ("You never know what someone will, or won't have, in the kitchen.") Kenny had conducted a pre-interview over the phone and suggested some summer favorites: pan-seared pork tenderloin with raspberry sauce; sweet corn, green bean and tomato sauté; Mediterranean pasta with roasted Roma tomatoes, black olives, feta cheese and pine nuts; pecan-crust chicken; plus a fresh garden salad and homemade honey-balsamic dressing.

"I try to cook healthy," notes Kenny, "using produce at its freshest point for the cleanest flavors and lots of color."



Jonathan Kenny. His precision with food and cooking includes leaving the kitchen cleaner than he found it.

During the summer, Chef Jonathan fixes a lot of fish and grilled vegetables. "People also want stuff to prep and grill. I'll skewer shrimp and beef, marinate it, and people will come home and put it on the grill."

In a few hours there were individually packaged servings of the pork, chicken, pasta and corn on the kitchen table, as well as separate containers of raspberry sauce, salad and dressing. Each dish was labeled and instructions for reheating were included.

But the important question is how did everything taste?

My spouse (a self-declared food snob) declared the pork tenderloin better than anything he'd had in a restaurant. True, the meat was perfectly seared, tender, and the raspberry sauce added sweet contrast. The servings were good-sized and presentation was nice – even in a plastic container. The pecan crust enveloping the chicken was thick, and added crunch and delicate flavor. The slow-roasted tomatoes in the Mediterranean pasta balanced out the robust vinaigrette, while the feta and pine nuts provided texture. The vegetable medley was colorful and fresh. The corn was scraped from the cob that day, giving it more punch. The garden salad was simple and nice: cucumber chunks, julienned carrots and grape tomatoes on iceberg lettuce. The homemade vinaigrette was light and just the right combo of strong and sweet.

None of the dishes was heavily spiced. "I don't like to cover up food," explains the chef.

Best of all, when Kenny left the kitchen was cleaner than before he came. No dishes in the sink, no lettuce on the floor, and the icebox was stocked. He even took out the garbage.

All I had to worry about was pouring something cold to drink. And that's not so hard on a steamy summer day.

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