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High-quality meal delivery offers takeout alternative

Chefs' services prepare top-quality meals for busy parents, career-focused singles

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Jessica Olthof, The Chronicle

Steven Levine of Munchery prepares grilled hanger steak, smashed potatoes and beet-feta salad at the meal delivery service's San Francisco kitchen.

By Amanda Gold

4:27 PM

The afternoon before Nicole Lipman was due to leave on a family vacation, she found herself in a jam.

"My sister-in-law called and said I needed to host dinner," says the mother of toddler boys, who was in the throes of a busy workday as a legal recruiter. "I didn't have time to cook, but I needed something good."

She turned to Munchery.

By 4 p.m., Lipman had ordered six portions of trout amandine, grilled artichokes and brownies from the online meal delivery service. It was delivered to her door less than two hours later, leaving her plenty of time to heat and plate the food.

"Then I hid the packages," she jokes.

An impromptu dinner party may not be a part of Lipman's weekly routine, but Munchery certainly is.

The meal service - and other similar delivery services - have gained huge popularity in the Bay Area, catering to everyone from busy parents who don't have time to cook, to career-focused singles who simply don't care to.

Designed to address the need for weeknight dinner help, companies like Square Meals, Franny's Kitchen, Debbie Does Dinner and Luke's Local - in addition to Munchery - not only offer inventive, seasonal alternatives to restaurant takeout (and a good choice for a last-minute Mother's Day gift), but inspire consumers to create similar dishes at home.

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The services also go far beyond satisfying just diners. Chefs say this type of cooking affords them the flexibility - and control - that they simply can't find in restaurant kitchens.



Jessica Olthof, The Chronicle

Levine, former executive chef at Cosmopolitan in San Francisco, slices grilled hanger steak for delivery.

"It's a great thing on both ends," says Tri Tran, who founded Munchery with Conrad Chu. "We started this because we wanted a solution to our own problem. We were two dads with young kids who were constantly struggling to find a better way to put dinner on the table."

Munchery

Tran and Chu met a decade ago. Techies by training, they have created in Munchery what is essentially an online marketplace, where the "goods" sold are the meals - not to mention the chefs creating those meals.

Nightly menus are posted on the website, broken down by each chef's menu. On an average night, diners can find items from 12 to 15 chefs, although Tran says there are as many as 70 on the full roster.

Veterans of kitchens at La Folie, Zuni Cafe, Chez Panisse, Gather, Cosmopolitan and Chez Papa Resto - to name a few - the chefs act as independent contractors, sourcing the ingredients and cooking the food. Munchery provides the rest, in the form of a website, packaging, marketing and delivery. The only requirements for the chefs are that they cook in a certified commercial kitchen - whether in Munchery's space or one of their own choosing - and, of course, that their food be delicious.

The Munchery staff describes the chefs as a team of all-stars, each working primarily in the style they know best.

They propose their own dishes, Tran says, but each day's offerings must read like a regular restaurant menu.





Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

Workers prepare food at Square Meals, which features ribollita soup made with white beans, squash and kale, and a salad of sugar snap peas, radishes, pea tendrils and yogurt cheese.

"You wouldn't see three chicken dishes or a bunch of braised dishes on one menu, so we have them sign up as soon as they know what they're making to avoid repeats. Other than that, they get to bring their best game."

On a recent night, that meant a grilled steak with chimichurri sauce from Raymond Reyes, an alumnus of Gather and Michael Mina; angel hair pasta with salmon and vodka sauce from Allison Jones, formerly of Nojo; and falafel-crusted prawns with golden beet salad and harissa tahini from ex-Cosmopolitan executive chef Steven Levine.

"One night I ordered pappardelle bolognese for my husband, but I got a big salad," Lipman says. "I'm trying to make healthier choices, and we don't always like the same food, so it's perfect."

It can be inspiring as well, offering ideas for the times that clients cook at home.

"One night I had couscous, and it had mint in it. It was great," Lipman says. "I never would have thought to do that on my own, but now I will definitely put some in next

time I make it."

Lipman, like other regular customers, says she looks first to find dishes that suit her mood - with daily delivery, she can decide at the last minute - but often ends up going back to the one or two chefs with whom she's had good experiences. In her case, that's someone like Levine.

"I feel like I'm running my own virtual restaurant," says Levine, who has been with Munchery since June and now makes up to 750 items each week. "People might think that cooking on the Internet is cold and impersonal, but I have more contact now with customers than I did as a chef. It's just not face to face."

After trying the meals, diners can post reviews online, and they can also directly message chefs through the site. Levine says this kind of back-and-forth relationship keeps him on his toes.

"If you use lesser-quality product or smaller portions, you get dinged on it," he explains. "So you're going to source the best stuff you can find."

"I've boiled down to its essence of what I've gone into this business for, and that is to cook."

When he was at Cosmopolitan, he admits that he felt less like a chef than a manager. "Now, I source, shop for, prep, cook and plate the food - everything from start to finish," he says.

Square Meals

Using the best ingredients possible is critical to the founders and chefs of similar companies as well.

Alison Mountford started Square Meals because she wanted consumers to have restaurant-quality meals at home - meals that they didn't have to plan a week in advance.

"I started as a personal chef," says the culinary school alum, "and the thing I heard most was that people wanted meals with a quicker turnover."

At Square Meals, customers order a comprehensive seasonal menu by midnight the night before desired delivery date. Delivery is three days a week, and orders can be individual meals or a weekly "box" of dinners.

Mountford started small, catering from a commissary kitchen with just herself and a delivery driver. Now, she has a brick-and-mortar cafe and a full staff.

"After I started this, people were saying that even midnight wasn't last-minute enough, so we decided to do deli-style service too," Mountford says.

In her Russian Hill cafe, neighbors can pop by for last-minute meals, all of which are delivery choices as well.

The menu changes weekly based on what's in season - she makes trips to the farmers' market and gets produce from farms like Mariquita and County Line. A weekly dish might be a scallion-citrus chicken with kumquat-green strawberry salsa, but selections almost always include favorites like turkey meat loaf with shaved vegetables and barbecue sauce, and Tuscan ribollita.

Soups are popular during winter months because they travel well, and Mountford says she's always surprised with how many people order the seafood entrees.

"I think people like to eat a lot of fish, but they're intimidated to cook it at home," Mountford says. "We use really high-end seafood purveyors, so customers always really like those offerings."

Mainly, she says, they appreciate the variety.

Franny's Kitchen

That's a sentiment echoed by Franny's Kitchen founder Frances Sanahuja.

Though Franny's is a little different, with just one meal offered each night, the former Whole Foods chef has been delivering meals for the past eight years and has the vast repertoire to show for it.

"It's more like the blue-plate special," Sanahuja says of her one-dish-at-a-time model, "but I deliver it fresh every night, and it's always something different."

Sanahuja sends a weekly e-mail to her subscriber base of 675 people, detailing the next week's menu. She requires customers to fill out the order form by noon Sunday so that she has time to shop for, and prepare, the food.

Sanahuja's Latin background means she's drawn to the foods of her childhood, but her recipes extend far beyond her famous chile rellenos and enchiladas. Menus include a variety of ethnic foods, from Indian and Thai to Chinese and Italian. Mondays are always meatless, and she tries to include one all-American meal each week.

Sanahuja says that her business has grown entirely by word of mouth, in large part because of her ability to keep things fresh and interesting, and the mostly organic, high-quality ingredients that she sources for each dish.

Debbie Does Dinner

Debbie Does Dinner is similar to Franny's, which also started small and grew by word of mouth. Chef and founder Debbie Epstein had started the business years ago, but shortly after stopped to focus on full time catering. When she adopted a son in 2007, she was craving the kind of flexibility that this kind of business affords. Debbie Does Dinner 2.0 was born.

Like Square Meals, Epstein puts out one large menu per week, but delivers only on Mondays. Customers can order an assortment of food for the week and make their way through the dishes as they see fit.

"I try to focus on comfort food made healthy," Epstein says, which translates into dishes like an oven-baked fried chicken, a seasonal vegetable pasta bake and a foil-wrapped fish. Side dishes, salads, dessert and one weekly breakfast item round out the menu.

In addition to the fresh items, Epstein includes frozen dishes like her signature turnovers. She even offers packages of frozen, pre-shaped cookie dough, providing plenty of options for busy people to eat or cook when time allows, even if it happens to be a week or two later.

Luke's Local

Luke Chappell, founder of Luke's Local, also focuses on a well-rounded assortment of meal options for harried families or workaholics. His idea to start the company came from personal experience.

"I was getting these (community-supported agriculture) boxes, and I found myself wasting a lot of produce," says Chappell, who was tired of coming home late with greasy takeout while his vegetables died a slow death.

He started selling prepared meals three years ago out of the Hillsdale Caltrain station in San Mateo. A year later, he moved the operation online and added other products to create a weekly box. Now he's opening a large warehouse and just launched a website that allows customers to order up to 24 hours in advance and more easily choose what goes into their box.

"I thought it would be a good idea to combine all the things you need as a busy person," Chappell says.

That means customers can order coffee, a loaf of freshly baked bread, half a dozen eggs, fresh flowers and local produce, in addition to prepared meals that can be brought to work or eaten at home.

Nightly entrees might have an ethnic bent - chicken tagine with couscous, for example, or massaman rex sole curry with brown rice and snap peas - but always includes a vegetarian option too. Last week that was three-cheese lasagna with pesto broccoli.

Produce - which is used in prepared meals in addition to coming fresh in the box - comes from farms like Mariquita and Full Belly. Snacks, baked goods and pizza from local artisans such as Beauty's Bagels and Josey Baker Bread supplement the weekly

offerings, as do on-the-go smaller meals like breakfast and lunch burritos. In short, Chappell says, customers should be able to place one order and be set for a good portion of the week.

However different in concept, all these delivery services are aimed at making life easier for consumers who are passionate about where their food comes from.

Next time you're faced with a crowd coming for dinner, all it takes is a quick trip online to pull together a last-minute dinner party. Just remember to throw away the evidence.

At your door

Here's a comparison of some Bay Area meal delivery services. Prices do not include delivery fee.

Munchery: www.munchery.com. Order by 4 p.m. for same-night delivery, or by 3 p.m. for areas outside of San Francisco. Delivery weekdays throughout the Bay Area. Entrees, \$10-\$15; side dishes and soups, \$3.50-\$6.50; desserts, \$3-\$5.

Square Meals: 2127 Polk St. (at Broadway), San Francisco; (415) 674-1069. For delivery, order online at www.squaremealssf.com. Order 24 hours in advance for Monday, Tuesday and Thursday delivery; San Francisco only. Meals are \$16-\$26, including sides, or are sold a la carte by the side dish or pound, ranging from \$5-\$26.

Franny's Kitchen: E-mail frannyskitchen@yahoo.com to get on the mailing list, or go to www.frannyskitchensf.com. Order by Sunday night for delivery Monday-Thursday; San Francisco only. Meals are \$9-\$12, with one weekly dessert option for about \$1.50.

Debbie Does Dinner: www.debbiedoesdinner.com. Order by Friday for Monday delivery throughout the Bay Area. Entrees (serves 1-2 people) are \$13-\$16; sides \$6-\$11 by the pint or quart; sweets and savory turnovers \$3.50-\$5.50.

Luke's Local: www.lukeslocal.com. Order 24 hours in advance for delivery Tuesday-Thursday in San Francisco, Tuesday in the East Bay, Wednesday on the Peninsula. Burritos, \$5; pizza, \$10; entrees, \$10-\$12. Other items vary.

- *Amanda Gold*

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