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# CARY LIFE

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“For somebody who cooks everyday at home it probably doesn’t save money, but for us it saves a bundle.”

LORI [redacted], who says having personal chef Joe Magenheimer cook for her family saves her \$200 a month.



Joe Magenheimer, who owns and runs Chef For Me, cooks several meals at once for clients. The former restaurant chef started his personal chef business over a year ago.

STAFF PHOTOS BY GRANT HALVERSON

## Answers to the dinner dilemma

Busy families are looking for fast, quality, nutritious alternatives to spending precious time in the kitchen

BY WENDY LEMUS  
STAFF WRITER

**W**hat's for dinner? If your family is like others in Cary, those words — and the thoughts that follow — can provoke blank stares into the icy abyss of the freezer when parents arrive home on a weeknight at 6 p.m.

And that's with 45 minutes to spare before heading out the door to Suzie's swim team practice.

Modern-day dinners are not what they used to be, back when mom had plenty of time to cook a nice pot roast, or to get a square Hamburger Helper meal on the table, with a side of fresh vegetables.

Fast forward to Cary circa the turn of the new millennium, and homemade sit-down meals have given way to fast-food stops, more dining out and prepackaged foods.

Or blank stares.

With many parents working, busy schedules for the entire family, and less “down” time for Americans in general, it is no wonder dinner has become a “catch as you can” pastime.

The food industry is catching up with trends, however. And that means more choices for families in Cary and elsewhere — more ways to get meals on the table in record time.



### Gourmet — at home

For the family of Mike and Lori [redacted] of Cary, a recent change in the way they do dinner has not only saved money, but provided a healthy assortment of already-prepared meals to choose from several nights a week.

[redacted]. After realizing that eating out four to five evenings a week was costing them a lot of money and a healthy eating style, the [redacted] hired a per-

As part of the service, Magenheimer shops for clients, and brings in his own cooking equipment as well as any spices and oils that he needs.

SEE DINNER, 11B

## DINNER

FROM PAGE 1B

seasonal chef to come to their home and cook in bulk, every other week.

Instead of heading to fast-casual restaurants several times each week, the family now enjoys a smorgasbord prepared by Joe Magenheimer, whose Chef For Me is one of the personal chef services counting several clients in the Cary and Apex area.

That may sound like a luxury to some, but Lori says the family is actually saving money by eating in more often.

"We're good parents, not good planners," she said. "When you hit the door at 6:30, 6:45, you don't really have time unless you're a good planner."

Before hiring Magenheimer, she said she was well familiar with those stares into the freezer, which usually led to a last-minute decision to head to a restaurant — and pay upward of \$50 to \$100 or more for the family of five.

On a recent weekday Magenheimer, working in the kitchen, fixed dishes such as jambalaya, "lo carb" beef stew with pumpkin and basil chicken stir fry, work that produced a variety of enticing smells.

The meals would be packaged in individual servings, frozen and ready to eat.

Magenheimer, a former restaurant chef, started the chef service over a year ago when he realized families were looking for help at mealtime.

For a flat fee — about \$335 for 30 servings — he will buy the groceries and come into the client's own kitchen to prepare meals in bulk using his own cooking equipment. He sends out the menu to choose from beforehand and buys the groceries fresh the same day. (He has other pricing packages available.)

"Usually it's the woman that hires me," Magenheimer said. "You've got to impress the woman."

Lori, who came home on her lunch break for a noon interview, chimed in, "It's not hard; all you've got to do is taste."

Some of her favorites are Magenheimer's soups; a family favorite is the jambalaya.

she said that not only is the meal cooked for her, but it's like eating gourmet-style several times weekly, "the best fried chicken, macaroni and cheese or mashed potatoes that you ever ate."

And the very best part — no more last-minute, blank stares into the freezer: "The hardest decision was deciding what to have," she said.

Mike, who has been on the Atkins diet, said, "This has been a big change healthwise for us," with portioned servings and the chef's ability to work with special diets, likes and dislikes.

Lori figures the family saves \$200 a month. "For somebody who cooks every day at home it probably doesn't save money, but for us it saves a bundle."

## The dinner dilemma

Grocery stores, dine-in restaurants and other businesses have tuned in to the dinner dilemma.

Virginia Hawkins of Cary said she didn't really have a dilemma, though, when she started ordering from Schwan's frozen-food home delivery service. She likes to cook and often has the time, but a neighbor recommended she



STAFF PHOTOS BY GRANT HALVERSON

After preparing the meals, Joe Magenheimer will package them in single serving-size containers. Client Mike says having meals prepared and pre-packaged makes sticking to a diet easier.

## FOR MEAL HELP

■ To contact Magenheimer, call 919-889-3752 or go to [www.chefforme.com](http://www.chefforme.com).

■ For information on Schwan's go to [www.schwans.com](http://www.schwans.com).

■ For information on Lowes Foods order-ahead shopping service, go to [www.lowes-foods.com](http://www.lowes-foods.com).

■ Outback Steakhouse's curbside take-away service can be reached by calling the restaurant at 460-1770.

try out Schwan's.

Hawkins and her husband, who have two grown children at home, liked some of the foods and became regular customers about six months ago.

The service, with "depots" in Garner, Raleigh and Wilson locally — and many Cary and Apex clients — delivers frozen entrees plus meats, vegetables, side dishes, breads, pizzas and ice cream to homes on a semi-weekly basis. Customers can preorder through the Web site.

"If I'm away visiting my sister, my husband can get what he wants and I don't have to feel guilty about not fixing him a meal," Hawkins said.

She also has found the prepared meals and other items convenient for her children, who sometimes do not make it home in time for dinner with their parents. Later in the evening, it's easy to pop a chicken pot pie in the microwave, she said.

Hawkins, whose family lived overseas for several years, said dinner hour is an important tradition at home — a time to meet up and talk about the day's events. The family rarely eats dinner out these days.

She thinks families need to pay more attention not only to how they are catching dinner, but also to what they are serving their children.

She said the fact that pizza, hot dogs and canned spaghetti have become staples in the American diet instead of occasional fillers has led to the health problems the country is seeing now — unprecedented rates of obesity and diabetes, for example.

"There's no excuse for ordering a pizza. ... Stop at the salad bar on

*"There is no excuse for ordering a pizza... Stop at the salad bar on the way home."*

## VIRGINIA HAWKINS

Cary woman who uses Schwan's home-delivery service and says there are many ways for families to eat healthier

the way home," she said.

## New trends

The and Hawkins are eating in more, but recent surveys show that the trend of dining out is climbing, with one of every five meals, 30 percent of the average person's calories and 40 cents on every food dollar eaten away from home (according to Hopkins Technology LLC).

Too busy to dine out? Outback Steakhouse was the first restaurant chain in the country to offer curbside meal pickup service, said Jennifer Rose, manager of the Cary restaurant, which started the service about seven years ago. Other chains such as Applebee's and Macaroni Grill have followed suit.

"A ton of people call us from work to place to-go orders," said Rose, who estimated that Outback's take-away business has quadrupled since the beginning.

Similarly, another trend grocery store manager Paul Urban expects to see rise steadily over the next decade: online ordering and curbside grocery pickup.

Urban, who manages Lowes Foods on Tryon Road, said the Chapel Hill store where he previously worked went from 10 to 15 online orders each week to 60

to 70 in just a couple of years. The Tryon store, one of several area Lowes locations, currently has one full-time and one part-time staffer filling such

orders. Lowes charges a small fee per order, or a monthly fee for unlimited service, and requires a three-hour notice.

Other stores in Cary offer similar programs.

Healthy but fast — that is what shoppers, whose heaviest weekday purchasing time falls between 4 and 7 p.m., want these days, Urban said.

Prepared salads and ready-to-eat foods such as deli quiches and rotisserie chicken sell fast at the dinner hour, he said.

"The biggest thing is covering the schedule to make sure enough

people are here" between 4 and 7, he said.

Manager Dan Arlt has been with Schwan's — a Minnesota-based company founded more than 50 years ago — since the 1970s, when many mothers were still at home fulltime. At that time many Schwan's customers were rural.

And Arlt said that when he was growing up, if a kid had one ball game a week, that was the norm.

"Lifestyles have changed. Now you've got several games a week and if you have more than one kid, they're scattered on several different fields," he said.

Now, most Schwan's customers are city dwellers with busy lives — looking for fast, quality, nutritious alternatives to spending evenings in the kitchen, Arlt said.

Contact Wendy Lemus at 467-3391 or [wlemus@nando.com](mailto:wlemus@nando.com).

For a taste of what Chef Joe Magenheimer can do, here is a sample recipe

## JAMBALAYA WITH SHRIMP, CHICKEN AND SAUSAGE

A spicy Cajun rice dish.

8 oz. Hillshire Farms smoked sausage  
1 lb. chicken breast, boneless, skinless  
1 cup onion, chopped into 1/2-inch squares  
3/4 cup red bell pepper, cut into 1/2-inch triangles  
3/4 cup green bell pepper, cut into 1/2-inch triangles  
1 15-oz. can stewed tomatoes  
1 1/4 cups tomato juice  
1/2 cup fresh parsley, minced  
3 tsp. olive oil (divided use)  
2 tsp. garlic, minced (divided use)  
1 3/4 cups Minute Rice  
1/2 tsp. salt  
1/2 tsp. black pepper, fresh ground  
1/2 tsp. cayenne pepper  
1/2 tsp. onion powder  
1/4 tsp. oregano, dried  
1/4 tsp. thyme, dried  
1 bay leaf  
1 cup chicken stock  
1 cup shrimp, bay frozen (125-175 count)

Cut the sausage into 1/2 circles, 1/2 inch thick. Cut the chicken into bite-sized pieces.

Heat 1 teaspoon of the olive oil over medium heat in a non-stick Dutch oven. Add the sausage and cook until the sausage is nicely brown.

Remove the sausage with a slotted spoon and set aside. Add the onions, bell peppers, and 1 teaspoon of the garlic. Saute for five minutes, until the vegetables are tender and start to change color. Remove the vegetables with a slotted spoon and set aside.



Jambalaya is a favorite in the home.

Add the remaining 2 teaspoons of olive oil and raise the heat to medium-high. When the oil is hot, add the chicken pieces.

Saute the chicken until browned nicely. Add the oregano, thyme, salt, pepper, onion powder, cayenne, bay leaf, tomatoes, tomato juice, chicken stock and remaining teaspoon of garlic. Bring to a boil, then add the uncooked rice. Return to a boil, reduce the heat, cover and cook until the rice is tender (approximately 10-15 minutes). Remove from the heat. Add the sausage and peppers, and let cool. After the rice has cooled, stir in the shrimp (still frozen) and the parsley.

Check the seasonings and adjust if necessary. Place in containers, label, and store in the freezer. Serves four.