

MOTHER'S LITTLE HELPER

Families Rely On Personal Chefs When There's "No Time To Cook"

BY RACHAEL MOELLER GORMAN

Personal chef Christine Robinson is more than just a cook — she changes people's unhealthy lives.

Personal chefs create meals from scratch, using fresh ingredients. They will prepare dozens of meals at a pop, and freeze them to give busy families an alternative to TV dinners or takeout. A personal chef can also help people who need a diabetic diet, or one that is low-salt, -cholesterol or -trans fat and -saturated fat, stay on track with their special nutritional needs.

MADE TO ORDER MEALS

In 2005, there were 9,000 personal chefs in the U.S., serving 72,000 clients. Over the next five years, their ranks are projected to grow to 25,000, according to a survey by the American Personal and Private Chef Association (APPCA). As glamorous as working in the kitchen of a hot, celebrity chef may sound, some culinary school graduates don't want to toil long hours in pressure-cooker restaurant kitchens. And harried families want to eat healthy, tasty meals — even though there's no time to cook. It's a match made in heaven.

"Other than chefs in fine dining restaurants, we're some of the last scratch cooks around," says Candy Wallace, executive director and founder of the APPCA and co-author of *The Professional Personal Chef*. "A lot of our clients ... want to make sure they're eating foods prepared from fresh ingredients, and not from cardboard boxes and plastic trays that go into the microwave."

Before hiring a personal chef, a potential client fills out an extensive assessment on his or her family's health priorities, as well as allergies and food sensitivities. The client and chef then fine-tune some more — one family member dislikes cilantro, but all of them like chicken. Based on these nutritional priorities and culinary preferences, the family selects individual dishes from an extensive list and/or provides the chef with ideas or recipes. The chef will then compose a weekly menu for the family. Many chefs are flexible and don't require clients to sign a contract — if a client doesn't like the first batch of meals, he or she can audition another chef.





Next, the chef and client arrange a mutually convenient day and time for shopping and cooking. The chef does all the grocery shopping, and brings the food and any necessary cooking utensils to the client's house — most states have regulations against a chef preparing food in his or her own home and transporting it to a client's home — and then spends three to six hours preparing meals for a week or more. The meals are packaged in Tupperware or glass containers, and labeled with instructions for defrosting and reheating. Best of all, the chef leaves behind a spotless kitchen!

FRESH AND HEALTHY

In addition to being able to choose meals from the chef's menu, a client can have family favorites or ethnic foods adjusted to make them healthier.

"We like to prepare people's favorite dishes, but in healthier versions," says Robinson, who owns a Boston-area personal chef business, A Fresh Endeavor, with husband Dennis Nosko. "There's a big

difference between making chicken parmesan traditionally and how we're able to make it. We can use egg substitute, fresh homemade bread crumbs with no added sodium, a bit of hard cheese and lower fat mozzarella and cooking spray. It turns out more flavorful than the oilier version. We take out all the oil calories, the cholesterol from the eggs, the dairy fats and the sodium in the bread crumbs."

Lisa Kent and her husband John,* who live in suburban New York, try to eat nutritious meals, in part because John has high cholesterol and a family history of cardiovascular disease (his father died of a heart attack in his 40s). But it's difficult, because they both have hectic work schedules and neither one cooks. "We'd always end up eating out or ordering in," says Lisa. Now that personal chef Danielle Fragala of Carmel-based Your Culinary Experience is doing their cooking, the Kents are able to stick to a diet low in saturated fats and salt and rich in vegetables and whole grain foods.

The couple's favorite dishes include skate marsala (with pan-steamed zucchini, squash, mushrooms and lentils) and lobster, shrimp, scallops, cod and calamari bouillabaisse with black rice. "It's delicious; it's pretty much exactly how I would cook if I could. It's great food with a lot

* The couple asked that their real names not be used.



of flavor, but not soaking in a ton of butter or sauce,” says Lisa.

When a client has been diagnosed with, or is recovering from, a heart-related health problem and needs to make significant — and immediate — changes in dietary habits, most chefs will be happy to meet with his or her dietitian or primary caregiver to ensure that the meals they are preparing follow the medically recommended protocol. “We give patients an enormous sense of peace of mind,” says Wallace.

Scott Nivens and his wife Michelle have been Robinson’s clients for three years. They don’t eat out all the time anymore, when they’re too tired or time-pressed to cook. Robinson cooks four dinners a week for them. They especially like her lightened-up version of eggplant parmesan, and her oven-fried chicken. “We’re getting balanced meals — more brown instead of white foods. They do fried rice with brown rice very well,” Scott says.

So here’s the \$64,000 question: How much is all this fabulousness going to cost? A personal chef is far more affordable than a private chef, who is employed by one family and cooks all their meals. A personal chef typically does dinner only, and can take on 10 or 20 clients. Wallace estimates that meals average about \$12

CHEF DANIELLE Fragala makes sure her clients eat nutritious, tasty meals — no matter how busy they are

to \$18 per person. Fees do vary — the cost of the ingredients may or may not be included — so shop around. Most personal chefs will offer “frequency discounts” to clients, and few require a contract or will ask for payment upfront. Typically, a client will pay for services rendered at the end of the chef’s visit.

When you figure in the time and cost of planning your weekly menu, buying groceries and making dinner after a long day’s work, it’s worth it to many people. Unless you’re ordering pizza or Chinese food, a personal chef is comparable in price to going out to eat, says Lisa. “With our meals at home, you feel good afterward, you’re full, you don’t have indigestion, and it’s a great way to eat in a more healthy way — it’s been fantastic.” 

FINDING A CHEF

A personal chef doesn’t necessarily need a degree from a culinary school. More important is having a few years of experience under his or her toque, being willing to accommodate your health needs and being easy to get along with. And you should like their cooking.

A new certification process went into effect in 2003: After four years, a chef can apply to take the written and practical cooking exam to become a Personal Certified Chef (P.C.C.); after six years, a Personal Certified Executive Chef (P.C.E.C.).

Chefs are just beginning to be certified because of the backlog of applicants, so don’t nix an otherwise capable and obliging chef, just because he or she isn’t certified. That said, the chef should have completed the National Restaurant Association’s ServSafe Program and be certified a safe food handler.

As with any other person who works in your home, the personal chef must have liability insurance to protect them and you against damage to your home, property or person.

These Web sites can help you find a personal chef in your zip code:

The American Personal and Private Chef Association
800-644-8389, www.personalchefsearch.com

US Personal Chef Association’s Hire a Chef
800-995-2138, www.hireachef.com

Personal Chef Directory
www.pchefnet.com