

BOULDER COUNTY BUSINESS REPORT

4/25/2007 - 6:13:53 PM

Dishing up organic meals in bunches

By Barbara Hey

BOULDER - The best-laid plans to prepare delicious, healthful, homemade dinners for the family often go awry. With schedules jam-packed, who has time to plan meals, shop and then cook every night?

To simplify meal prep, the Organic Dish handles the preliminary tasks of creating the recipes, and gathering and chopping the ingredients, and lets you get the glory of cooking. Toby and Beckie Hemmerling started the business in March, offering 12 meals each month that can be assembled in their commercial kitchen or purchased already packed and frozen, both ready to take home and cook. They also sell frozen grab 'n' go entrees at the Boulder Farmers' Market.

The ingredients used are natural, organic and locally grown, when possible, and the fish is wild caught. The menu selections reflect an array of cuisines including Thai, Indian and Mexican and vary by cooking method required such as oven, grill, pan fry and slow cooker. As for time frame, the meals can be eaten promptly or frozen for up to five months.

The business was inspired by the couple's devotion to health and home cooking. "We love to cook and love to cook together," says Toby, who just left his day job as the associate director of MBA admissions and marketing at the CU Leeds School of Business to focus on the Organic Dish. Creating the recipes is a joint effort, and friends volunteer as testers to perfect the dishes before they appear on the monthly menu.

He and Beckie, in her former career a botanist with the U.S. Forest Service, underwent a dietary overhaul prior to hatching their business concept, eliminating processed foods, sugar and caffeine. Creating meals from scratch with wholesome ingredients entailed a lot of time, not just shopping, but also chopping, cooking and cleanup.

While they could handle the work, the Hemmerlings say 60 percent of Americans don't think about what to make for dinner until 4 p.m. Then they try to cram all preparatory tasks into the harried hours after work, which is why less-than-healthy readymade entrees often end up as dinner.

"We searched for prepared organic meals," Toby says, in hopes of taking a break from nightly kitchen duty. "No one was doing it. The prepared food segment of the food and beverage industry does \$250 million annually, and it's experiencing explosive growth."

If prepared "organic" foods, they thought, were to grab a fraction of that market share, this would be the town. "We thought Boulder would be a great place to try it out. If it doesn't work here, it won't work anywhere."

To create the do-it-yourself meals, customers first to sign up for a session, held at 6 p.m. each Thursday. They select what dishes to assemble from the monthly offerings. The minimum is four dishes, and 12 are doable in one session. The meals can be made to feed from two to six people.

At each workstation the dish recipe is posted, and each ingredient with measuring utensils is set out on the table. Then, the work: measuring each ingredient and pouring it into a Ziploc bag. When complete the meal is sealed and a label with cooking instructions is stuck to the pack.

Organic Dish also hosts private parties, where friends can get together for a night of conversation and meal assembly.

Paula Fornwalt and John Frank of Fort Collins are Organic Dish regulars. They visit the Organic Dish kitchen once a month, and make enough to cover at least one dinner a week. "It's perfect for when you come home too late or too tired to cook," Fornwalt says.

Many dishes are designed to be cooked in a Crockpot, good for families on the go during the workday or on vacations, spending the day on the slopes. "You can start the dish cooking in a Crockpot in the morning, spend the day working or skiing, and come home to a ready-to-eat dinner," she says.

The monthly menus always include four vegetarian options. The prices vary according by recipe, and are comparable to what it would cost for meal takeout. In April, servings for four to six ranged from \$60.70 for the lamb roti kebab to \$28.35 for the vegetarian version of the chili.

Last fall, Toby's presentation of the Organic Dish concept won the pitch slam competition for the business with the most promising profit potential at Naturally Boulder Day. As a prize, the couple were invited to consult with Doug Collier, the president of the Boulder Innovation Center, an organization that helps entrepreneurs transform their ideas into a successful business.

The Organic Dish is self-funded, and the couple's plan is to invest revenues into growing the business. The company is currently sharing a commercial kitchen, but they hope to move the business into its own space by late summer, early fall.

Word is spreading. "The Farmers' Market has been great for us," Toby says. "We've gotten a lot of visibility. It's an opportunity for people stop by buy one of our meals. We now have a lot of happy customers."

The Organic Dish

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