

Los Angeles Times

FOOD

Wednesday, July 27, 2005



MEL MELCON Los Angeles Times
DAILY MEALS: A Fresh Dining driver makes a drop-off.

It's all in the delivery

By VALLI HERMAN
Times Staff Writer

WHEN the rich and famous want to go organic, get in the Zone or visit South Beach at dinnertime, they can count on their personal chefs to bring together a strict diet and fine dining on one plate. For the rest of us, there's a growing number of meal delivery services that promise to keep us (and our hips) on the straight and narrow.

They'll do the planning, the cooking and the portioning. They'll deliver daily meals in an insulated bag, each dish in its own plastic container.

Such services have been around a few years, but now several have taken the idea to the next level. They've teamed with chefs and caterers who ought to know a thing or two about good food. One even has a former Bastide sous-chef at the helm.

But it is really possible to order diet food, put it in the microwave and, at the beep, dine on a delicious meal?

[See *Deliveries*, Page F8]

Ding-dong! Your diet's here

(Deliveries, From Page F7)

I decided to find out. In my search, I came across dozens of meal-delivery programs created by nutritionists, personal trainers, restaurants, raw and organic chefs and other specialty firms. Some deliver several days' worth of meals at one time. About half a dozen offered a combination of fresh daily home delivery to avoid wilted, days-old fare, meals based on the latest weight-loss theories and the promise of satisfying a picky palate.

I found that the companies with the most appealing menus operated along Zone diet guidelines. That is, each of three meals and two daily snacks is balanced with 30% protein, 30% favorable fats and 40% carbohydrates. I decided to find out. In my search, I came across dozens of meal-delivery programs created by nutritionists, personal trainers, restaurants, raw and organic chefs and other specialty firms. Some deliver several days' worth of meals at one time. About half a dozen offered a combination of fresh daily home delivery (to avoid wilted, days-old fare), meals based on the latest weight-loss theories and the promise of satisfying a picky palate.

I found that the companies with the most appealing menus operated along Zone diet guidelines. That is, each of three meals and two daily snacks is balanced with 30% protein, 30% favorable fats and 40% carbohydrates, reportedly to keep a dieter's blood sugar levels steady. A few firms also promised that snacks would be made of fresh food, not prepackaged protein bars.

That sounded good to me, and needing to lose a few pounds anyway, I tried three of the newest daily-delivery companies for one week each: Zone Los Angeles, Zone Chefs and Fresh Dining. All their menus promised a level of cooking unseen in most diet programs. Each used nutritionists to help develop meals; each offered short-term tryouts, delivered across a wide area and allowed for at least minimal customization. The prices ranged from \$30 a day for a one-time promotion to \$55 for a gourmet, organic program.

None of the services required that I navigate a complicated menu or delivery chart. I simply phoned each to arrange delivery and place my special requests.



Photographs by BECCA CHAN Los Angeles Times
Left: Fresh Dining dishes, clockwise from top left: frittata, Mediterranean fattoush, roast beef salad, and chicken with Thai curry sauce.



At your door, at your service

Many fresh meal delivery services operate in Los Angeles and offer diet programs. Here are the three featured in the story.

Fresh Dining (818) 831-4700
www.freshdining.com. Delivers to Los Angeles and Orange counties. Daily menus include organic or conventional ingredients in three meals and two daily snacks. Prices range from \$42.95 a day for a 90-day subscription to \$66.95 a day for two weeks of organic meals. A corporate program will offer meals delivered to offices.

Zone Los Angeles (323) 296-6050; www.zone-la.com. Delivers throughout the L.A. area, Malibu to Burbank, Huntington Beach to Hollywood and points in between. The Zone-compliant programs consist of three meals and two snacks and cost \$45 per day (two days' worth in one weekend delivery). A five-day trial can be credited to a longer subscription. All programs are \$45 per day; five days with longer commitments.

Zone Chefs (800) 879-0561, Ext. 1; www.zonechefs.com. Delivers three-meal, two-snack daily packages throughout Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Riverside and Orange counties. Prices range from \$37 a day for a 31-day plan to \$42.95 for a seven-day trial.

Zone Chefs
IHK executive chef for L.A.'s Zone Chefs, Hag Brundage, was a founding employee of the now-defunct Zone Gourmet. He offers advice on markets for unusual ingredients and unexpected ideas for Zone-licious. (Deliveries, Page F8)

Photographs by BECCA CHAN Los Angeles Times
Left: Fresh Dining dishes, clockwise from top left: frittata, Mediterranean fattoush, roast beef salad, and chicken with Thai curry sauce.



Highlights...

Fresh Dining

My favorite of the three services was Fresh Dining...that sounded — and tasted — positively gourmet.

By far, the program was the most carefully thought out. Compared with the other services, Fresh Dining's food arrived in the best condition: It was the coldest, most artfully presented and most gently undercooked to allow for optimal reheating.

The menu sounded elegant and ambitious, with items such as Chambord panna cotta with raspberry gelée, steak with mushroom cream sauce or goat cheese lasagna.

Lunches...an array of entrée-worthy salads, such as marinated flank steak on shaved fennel; mixed greens with currants, apples and walnuts; or arugula with peaches, prosciutto, mozzarella and silky-sweet ice wine dressing. Dipped in that dressing, I'd even eat my pencil.

Fresh Dining offered food so delicious that I would gladly have eaten four servings of each dish. That I didn't consume the entire contents of my daily cooler in one sitting is testimony to my fortitude...

Fresh Dining employed details that added to the nutritional, aesthetic and psychological appeal. Slathering white horseradish cream and caraway seeds over vivid shaved beets or pouring patterns of basil oil into your coconut broth brought a level of pleasing ritual to the meal.

This was in stark contrast to Zone Chefs' high-protein pastries, several of which tasted of protein powder, or Zone Los Angeles' unimpressive olive tapenade that came with the same things I pack in my kindergarten's lunch — crackers and string cheese.

[The miso-glazed cod] for dinner...was as fabulous as anything I've had in pricey restaurants. The fish was moist and succulent, the glaze a beautiful balance of flavors salty, sweet and tart.

Temptation is nothing, I realized, when you've got a better option waiting at home.

And I'm convinced dieting doesn't have to be about deprivation. It requires some restraint, yes, but there's no reason to abandon the pleasures of good food.

French lentils and feta



BECCA CHAN Los Angeles Times
Total time: 40 minutes
Serves: 4 appetizer servings
Note: From *Dietitian's Kitchen* of Fresh Dining

- 1/2 cup fresh green lentils or Beluga lentils, rinsed and picked through
- 3 bay leaves
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 3 tablespoons lime juice
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/2 medium shallot, peeled and minced
- 2 tablespoons mint, parsley or cilantro, or a combination, finely chopped
- 2 1/2 tablespoons feta cheese, crumbled or diced
- Line wedges (optional)

1. Place the lentils in a medium saucepan with 3 cups water and the bay leaves. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to low, simmer. Cook until the lentils are about two-thirds done, about 12 to 15 minutes. Add the salt, and cook until al dente, about 3 to 5 minutes more.
 2. Drain the lentils, transfer them to a medium bowl, and cool slightly. Add the lime juice, cumin and shallot. When cool, add the chopped lentils and remove the bay leaves.
 3. Top with the feta and garnish with line wedges, if desired.
- Each serving: 141 calories; 10 grams protein; 21 grams carbohydrates; 2 grams fiber; 3 grams fat; 1 gram saturated fat; 5 mg cholesterol; 628 mg sodium.

French Dining

Most of the three services was Fresh Dining, a 31-month-old company with a plan that sounded — and tasted — positively gourmet. Breakfast might be a Greek and Spanish omelet with slow-roasted tomatoes, or trout, a salad of arugula, prosciutto, mozzarella and a low dressing, and dinner could be a skirt steak with mushroom cream sauce. I'd expect nothing less from a chef with *Dietitian's Kitchen* from consultant chef was what chef at Bastide for two years? And I wasn't disappointed.

British-based Fresh Dining offers a carbohydrate-counting plan called Fresh Start Diet that combines lean proteins, low-fat oils and beneficial fats, but not all Zone-specific percent age. It delivers three meals and two snacks daily, but help you hook up with a personal trainer and nutritionist or organic upgrade options. The company serves the same meals to all clients daily, but it also offers some substitutions, such as substituting my fish for chicken.

Miso-glazed black cod

- Total time: 40 minutes plus overnight marinating
- Serves 4
- Note: From *Dietitian's Kitchen* of Fresh Dining. This recipe is a Japanese restaurant available at Zone members. The chef, chef-owner, is available for the end.
1. 1/2 cup orange, drained
 2. 3 tablespoons light brown sugar
 3. 1/2 cup white rice
 4. 1/2 cup mirin
 5. 1/2 cup soy sauce
 6. 1/2 cup black cod fillet, skin on and bones removed
 7. 4 pieces cucumber, thinly sliced
 8. Combine the ingredients, except

BECCA CHAN Los Angeles Times
The miso-glazed black cod is served at the top of the page.