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Personal Taste

Chefs-for-hire not just for the well-heeled

BY MIKE THOMAS
Staff Reporter

First off, let's get something straight (if it isn't already): A personal chef is not a private chef. So when you hear or read about "Oprah's personal chef," for instance, it's technically incorrect. Bigwigs like Oprah have full-timers — private chefs — preparing their cuisine, not toques-for-hire who pop in occasionally to whip up a freezer-load of feasts.

Those are the personal chefs, and they're not only for the rich and/or famous. The ones who work in and around Chicago cater to a wide array of clients, including working couples, young mothers and the elderly.

"It was very hard to get started, because the concept of personal cheffing when I started a little more than ten years ago was kind of an unknown phenomenon here in the Midwest," says Roger Greene, who runs the personal chef service Dinner is Solved (chefrogergreene.com).

Before becoming a personal chef, Greene graduated from Johnson & Wales University's College of Culinary Arts in Providence, Rhode Island, and logged 12 years as a corporate chef with the Aramark corporation.



Roger Greene

Prior to arriving at clients' homes around 9 a.m. (he typically stays until around 4 p.m.), Greene has them list their likes, dislikes and allergies. He also does all the grocery shopping at a cost of \$150 to \$200, then prepares 20 entrees — five days' worth for four people (or more, depending on how much they eat.) He charges \$400 for the service. That covers groceries, containers and his labor (which always includes a thorough cleanup). Some kitchens he works in are tiny and basic. Others are roomy and state-of-the-art.

"These are people who are busy," he says of those on his roster. "Typically they're D.I.N.K.S. — dual income, no kids. Or double income with children — a child or two. These are corporate types. They're not necessarily rich-rich, but they're well employed. They live in apartments or they own their own home. They go to the gym and they get home at seven o'clock, and there's a nanny involved."

Stephanie Jensen of La Cuisine Personal Chef Service (kitchensurfing.com) also has a decade of experience and sees her service as "a huge advantage" to eating out or ordering in — because it's likely to be cheaper and it's almost certainly healthier.





Chef Stephanie Jensen prepares the orange roasted beets. | PHOTO BY MIKE THOMAS

"Integrating myself into a client's home on a regular basis does have its challenges," she explained. "My priorities are providing exactly what the customer wants to eat as well as protecting their privacy and respecting their space... As long as people know what to expect, everything works out fine."

"Integrating myself into a client's home does have its challenges."

Stephanie Jensen,
La Cuisine Personal Chef Service

In a twist to personal chef housecalls, former corporate consultant Melanie Mityas helms a small company called Madison & Rayne (madisonandrayne.com) that launched in March. Instead of preparing food in peoples' homes, Rayne's business partner Josh Jones (they met in 2008 at Chicago's acclaimed Spring restaurant, where Jones used to be chef du cuisine) pre-prepares the ingredients in a commercial kitchen at Kitchen Chicago. They're then packaged with labels and delivered (often by Mityas, who also does the marketing) with directions on how to make each meal. Menus are approved at least a week in advance, and the cost is between \$12 and \$18 per serving. It's essentially a head-start for people who like to cook but don't much time.

"People are trying foods that they wouldn't have made themselves or wouldn't typically order off a menu," Mityas says. "So it's kind of a little culinary adventure at the same time."

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Who's in the kitchen?

Here's one area resident's take on having a personal chef:
Shari Palmer, Physician,
La Cuisine Personal Chef
Service client

"We decided to hire a personal chef because we wanted to start living a healthier life style and developing better eating habits. My husband and I both work full time. Each evening, we would have to go back out to buy dinner. After a while, choosing which restaurant or fast food place that we would go to became a chore. Also, we started getting tired of going to the same places every week and having the same meals."

"We looked on the Internet and called a couple of personal chefs. Stephanie answered immediately and set up an appointment to come to our home and discuss her business plan. We told her what we did not like and what different foods we were willing to try. Since I do not cook, I also informed her that I did not have a lot of pots or pans for her to cook with. Fortunately, that was not an issue."

"Each weekend she sends us a menu of what she is going to prepare for the upcoming week. If there is any meal that we do not want, she will change it — even though that issue has yet to occur. I like the fact that I do not have to think about what I want Stephanie to prepare. In the entire time that she has been with us, we have had only a few meals repeated. It is like going to a restaurant every day and ordering a different meal."

—Mike Thomas