

# There's a Stuffed Quail in the Mail

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By ALINA DIZIK, Wall Street Journal

Weeknight dinner in most American households is fast, easy, possibly tasty—but almost never elaborate. Several meal-delivery Web sites want to lift eating-in to a higher level by delivering high-quality prepared dishes to your doorstep. Whether ordered to celebrate a holiday or as a gift, the food is billed as being as good as what's served in a fine restaurant. I put five services to the test, sampling meals with my grandparents (both former food technologists) at home in Chicago. We enjoyed them all but found some interesting points of difference.

Most of the sites said orders must be placed three weekdays in advance, but twice we got orders after just two days. Most sites limit delivery to the lower 48 states. It was fun browsing the menus, with options ranging from traditional American to European and Asian-influenced fare. Sites list ingredients and calorie counts; most let you mix and match entrees and side dishes.

The food arrived via UPS, frozen and packed in dry ice. Standard shipping cost \$16 to \$20, and some companies offered overnight service at a hefty premium of \$30 or more. That means on small orders, delivery charges could easily eat up more than half the total cost. Ordering several meals at once makes the service more cost effective.

Most companies say they depend on orders for special occasions and from retirees and busy singles. "Our focus has been on people who retired from cooking or can't cook—traditionally it's been a little bit of an older consumer," says Greg Miller, chief executive of Magic Kitchen Inc., of Los Altos, Calif. In business since 2005, he says sales have been steady despite high unemployment.

To test the services, we ordered main and side dishes from each, kept them in the freezer for several days (companies recommend consuming the meals within 30 days), then followed the preferred preparation methods. There's no such thing as instant

gratification. Some dishes took almost an hour to heat in the oven; one required defrosting throughout the day.

Our first order, from Dinewise Inc., of Farmingdale, N.Y., arrived after just two days. We had perused the menu's roughly 90 vegetarian, low-carb, low-sodium and even diabetic entrees, starting at \$9, and put together a dinner of stuffed chicken, risotto and butternut squash. The food arrived in microwavable plastic. We had to slit open the packets of chicken and risotto and heat for two minutes in the microwave; we boiled the butternut squash on the stove. The chicken was slightly dry; the butternut squash didn't seem thick enough. "We do 100% guarantee, call us for a substitute or refund," says Paul Roman, company president.

Next we tried ImpromptuGourmet.com, a unit of M&S Fine Foods Inc., Charlottesville, Va. Despite the three- to seven-day delivery indicated on the Web site, our food arrived within two days. Our meal for two—roast half duck with rotisserie seasoning and lotus wontons with broccoli, chorizo and cheese—tasted fresh but took almost an hour to heat in the oven. We liked the wine recommendations offered online (Gewürztraminer or Sauvignon Blanc); some meals come with complimentary bread and a music CD. From GourmetStation, Atlanta, we picked beef short ribs and macadamia mahi-mahi. They came in sturdy containers, which went directly into the oven for 30 minutes. The beef was tender, the fish slightly chewy. Founder Donna Lynes-Miller says when someone complains, the company tries to replicate the experience to diagnose the problem and offers a free meal.

**MagicKitchen.com's menu** offered options claiming to meet several dietary requirements. For example, there's gluten-free red snapper with Mediterranean sauce and rice with mixed vegetables. We ordered barley vegetable pilaf and beef Bordelaise. At 152 calories a serving, the pilaf was light and tasted good—but we had to remember to let it thaw for several hours. The Bordelaise sauce, frozen in a packet that we had to boil in water, came out runny.

I miscalculated when I ordered from ArtikoChef, of Independence, Mo. My meal arrived on time, but a day later than I expected—a disaster if I'd been entertaining. Vacuum-

sealed tilapia in herb wine butter, defrosted and heated in the microwave, tasted great. Brie-and-onion tarts were done after five minutes in the oven.

In all, we were pleasantly surprised with the sophisticated offerings and flavors, making the services a reasonable alternative to restaurant dining. Still, steep delivery charges make this an expensive treat, and in the end someone still has to do the dishes.