



GAYLE SHOMER - STAFF PHOTOS

Michelle Crouch (left) and customer Erin Mason learned to pay close attention to the directions while putting together their dishes at the new business Dream Dinners in South Charlotte.

# No chopping, no shopping, no cleaning

*Could new Dream Dinners 'meal assembly' business offer what your busy family needs?*

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First, a confession: I was once so desperate to get fast, healthy meals on the family dinner table that I bought one of those books on how to cook for a month in one day.

Five hours later, my arms aching from chopping, slicing and mixing, I had completed only half the recipes. My kitchen, meanwhile, was a disaster: shredded cheese on the floor, grease splatters on the stove, and a giant pile of dishes in the sink.

All that, and the meals didn't even taste that good.

So when I heard about Dream Dinners, the first "meal assembly" kitchen business in Charlotte, I couldn't resist.

The concept is simple: The store provides recipes and ingredients for a variety of meals; customers assemble up to 12 meals at a time in the store and freeze them at home.

No shopping, no chopping, no cleaning. No wonder the concept been such a hit in other parts of the country.

Dream Dinners was launched in 2002 by a Seattle woman who taught friends how to make freezer meals. The chain now has 99 stores in 25 states. And there are dozens of imitators.

While I bought into the concept, I still had questions: Do the meals really feed four to six people? How much freezer space do you need? How difficult is the

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Add your own side items to make dishes like Chicken Mirabella into a complete meal.

### About Dream Dinners

#### WHAT:

A fix-and-freeze service that offers an easy way to feed your family healthy, home-cooked meals.

#### WHERE:

10110 Johnston Road, in the Food Lion shopping center just south of Park Road.

#### SAMPLE MEALS:

Herb-Crusted Chicken With Seasoned Rice, Apple-Braised Boneless Pork Chops, Chicken Enchiladas, Dilled Shrimp With White Rice.

#### COST:

About \$200 for a two-hour session of 12 dinners that serve 4-6 people, or \$2.50 per serving. A Quick 6 Dinner Fix is also available for 6 meals prepared in one hour for about \$120.

#### MORE INFORMATION:

Visit [www.dreamdinners.com](http://www.dreamdinners.com) or call (704) 341-8784.

# 'Meal assembly' suit your family?

## Dinners from IE

preparation? And most important: Would my husband and 2-year-old daughter eat the food?

### On Tuesday, Friday, Saturday

The Charlotte store, which opened last month, offers 12-meal sessions on Fridays and Saturdays and six-meal sessions on Thursdays.

I signed up for a "Quick 6 Dinner Fix," partly because I wasn't sure I had the freezer space for 12.

I picked the recipes I would make in advance at [www.dream-dinners.com](http://www.dream-dinners.com).



Crouch month.

Options ranged from old-fashioned meat loaf to sesame-ginger salmon and pepper-crusted London broil. The menu changes each

The cost depends on the entrees you pick, but averages about \$200 for the 12-meal session. My bill for six meals was \$120 and included a \$17 session fee that doesn't apply to the larger sessions.

If the meals serve six, that means I paid \$3.33 per portion - equivalent to or less than what I typically spend to cook at home.

### Attractive to busy moms

The Charlotte franchise is in a strip center on Johnston Road, just south of Park Road. The store basically consists of two long counters with 14 prep areas, each with a series of plastic bins that contain pre-chopped, pre-sliced ingredients.

I was the first to arrive, but was quickly joined by three others, all first-timers. Two were busy moms like me; the third was a mom-to-be trying the service before the baby was born.

In other parts of the country, the concept also has been popular with senior citizens and young professionals, but moms are the bread-and-butter. Some people like to do it together as a social outing.

I donned a black apron, washed my hands and started with Chicken Mirabella, a Dream Dinners signature dish. The chicken was already in a resealable plastic bag; all I had to do



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Assembled meals can be put in plastic bags for freezing.

### Dream Dinners: How it Works

- Pick either 6 or 12 entrees from an online menu, then reserve a time to show up and make the meals.
- At the scheduled time, go to the store and follow step-by-step instructions to make the meals. Most are assembled in resealable plastic bags or disposable aluminum baking dishes.
- Apply a label to each dish with cooking instructions and serving suggestions.
- Take the food home and pop it in the freezer.
- Thaw, cook and serve the meal.

### Insider Tips

- Don't forget to bring something to carry your dinners home. You can bring a laundry basket or box, but veterans know a cooler - especially one with wheels - works best.
- If your family is small, try the six-meal session and divide each family-size entree into two meals.
- To feed a large group, double up on an entree.
- Leave out any ingredients you don't like.
- Go alone to save time. It takes longer to follow the recipe while sharing stories with friends.
- If you want to make it especially fun, gather some friends, bring a bottle of wine and book the place on a Friday night. The staff will crank up the music and get into the spirit.

was add garlic, olives, capers and other ingredients outlined on a mounted recipe card.

There was one surprise: Prunes hadn't been listed in the meal's online description. Dream Dinners stresses that it's OK to leave out an ingredient, but I decided to add them in the spirit of the experience.

Meanwhile, staff members hovered nearby to remove dirty utensils, restock ingredients and answer questions.

When I finished the chicken, I added a label with cooking direc-

tions and serving suggestions. Then I moved to the next station. This is easy, I thought to myself.

Then I started talking.

### A lesson learned

Deep in conversation with another mom, I mistakenly poured the tomato sauce in the "pasta romance rolls" recipe straight onto the stuffed shells. I was supposed to pour it into a mixing container.

No problem, said owner Gen Jezek. She offered to let me start

over, saying the extra food would go to charity. But I decided to try to save the meal by mixing the ingredients into the sauce right in the baking pan.

The lesson: The experience is more fun if you're social, but it does make following the recipes more challenging.

The rest of the session went smoothly. In all, it took about an hour and 20 minutes to prepare six meals. It takes less time as you gain experience, Jezek said.

I carried my meals home in a cooler. They fit easily into my refrigerator-top freezer. By putting three into the refrigerator to use within a few days, as the store recommended, I could have squeezed another six in there as well.

### Would family really like it?

I cooked the pasta romance rolls that night.

I had low expectations for two reasons: the aforementioned screw-up in assembling the meal, and the sauce contained sun-dried tomatoes, which my husband, Pete, doesn't particularly like.

I decided not to mention the ingredients.

Voila! He and my daughter both loved the sauce.

I, too, thought it had just the right tanginess to balance the ricotta cheese inside the shells.

The other meals, for the most part, also met or exceeded expectations.

The mouth-watering rub on the pepper-crusted London broil made up for the meat's slight toughness, and the ginger-sesame sauce on the salmon was delicious. The Chicken Mirabella, even with the prunes, was also a hit.

The only one I wasn't thrilled with was the meat loaf, which was made with lean ground beef, oatmeal, tomato sauce and spices. But that may be because nothing can top my mother's recipe.

My husband and I, both half-Italian, typically eat more than your standard deck-of-cards-sized serving. So in our house at least, about half the meals provided four adult servings, not six.

Would I do it again?

As a mom still struggling to balance work and parenthood, anything that puts 12 no-hassle, healthy meals in my freezer is worth doing.

But these tasted good, too.