

# WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL

Monday, September 8, 2008

**WHOLE DEAL:** SHOPPING, COOKING, CLEANUP



JOURNAL PHOTOS BY JENNIFER ROTENIZER

Personal Chef Dianne Blancato, the owner of 123 Cuisine, puts a cilantro garnish on Broiled Tilapia With Thai Coconut-Curry Sauce.

## Rising Service

*More local families are discovering they can save time and eat healthier meals with a personal chef*

**By Richard Craver**  
Journal Reporter

Business is heating up for personal chefs in the Triad.

At least 11 personal chefs - including four in Forsyth County - are serving the Triad. That's up from two or three just 10 years ago.

In most instances, a personal chef does the grocery shopping, prepares, cooks and stores the meals in the client's home, then cleans up. All that hungry and time-starved clients have to do is heat and serve. The cost for each meal is not cheap - a range of between \$10 and \$20 a person - but comparable with many sit-down restaurant meals.

The cost can be less for a simple meat-and-potatoes meal or higher depending on the client's taste.

Although making a full-time living as a personal chef is challenging financially, demand for service is rising despite - or in some situations because of - a struggling local economy since most meals are prepared with leftovers in mind.

# CHEFS

continued

"Hiring a personal chef really is a significant way of saving time for clients, and they get a wonderful meal," said Dianne Blancato, who expanded her service - 123 Cuisine - into a full-time job in May after leaving her job as a public-relations spokeswoman for Lowes

Foods. She is a graduate of the Institute of Culinary Education in New York.

"People, particularly parents, lose so much time during the course of a week doing errands and going from one practice to another," Blancato said. "A personal chef can give them

some of that time back because it eliminates trips to the grocery store and cooking time."

Blancato, like most personal chefs, has developed customized menus for each of her 10 clients. Typically she makes several meals at a time.

"The food prepared by a personal chef is fresher, healthier and more in tune with the client's dietary needs," Blancato said.

According to the Personal Chef Service Industry, there are about 5,000 personal-chef businesses operating in the United States and Canada - more than triple the amount in 1997.

There are about 90,000 clients who use a personal-chef service on a regular basis, spending more than \$300 million a year. The trade group expects the amount spent on personal chefs to double by 2012.

Some local personal chefs, such as Eating In/Creative Catering of Clemmons, also provide an "assembled meals" service in which clients can cook their own meals with the help of a personal chef. Many also offer catering services or cooking classes to supplement their income.

Depending on the number of clients and how many meals they can cook in one day, a full-time personal chef can gross a salary of \$40,000 a year or more, said Gail Kenagy, the chief executive of the Culinary Business Academy of Rio Rancho, N.M.

"Being a personal chef is not for everybody," Kenagy cautioned. "It takes a lot of hard work, advertising and building of word of mouth to get a steady base of clients."

Culinary schools, such as the Johnson and Wales University branch in Charlotte, are finding more students interested in pursuing a personal-chef career right away rather than gaining experience in the restaurant, resort and country-club sectors, said Jerry Lanuzza, the chairman of the university's college of culinary arts.

Lanuzza said he works as a personal chef for a limited clientele.

"You began to see students moving in the direction of a personal-chef career about 10 years ago," Lanuzza said. "They don't want the typical lifestyle of a restaurant chef or a country-club chef, working at night, often late at night. It's also a good job choice for a household wanting to supplement their income."

Lanuzza offers a piece of advice when it comes to selecting a personal chef.

"Make sure to check out the credentials of any personal chef," Lanuzza said. "This is a craft, with food safety a very serious consideration. If the chef doesn't know what he or she is doing, they have the potential to make someone very sick or



Diced red peppers, garlic and green onions are being prepared as part of the ingredients of the Broiled Tilapia dish.

worse."

Kenagy said that consumers should make sure that the personal chef is insured if they are going to prepare meals in their home.

Blancato said she had considered a culinary career when she was younger.

Even while working at Lowes Foods, "the food thing had been on my mind for more than 10 years," Blancato said. "I did some research, decided to go to culinary school and just loved it."

"I'm still trying to build up my business, going after the businessperson who lives in a corporate apartment when they visit the headquarters, or the businessperson who travels a lot and wants good meals waiting on them when they get home."

She caters to people such as Mike Hughes, a client of Blancato's who travels frequently on business and started using her service in May. He has used the service a couple of times, having Blancato make seven dishes - each with two or three portions - for himself and his son.

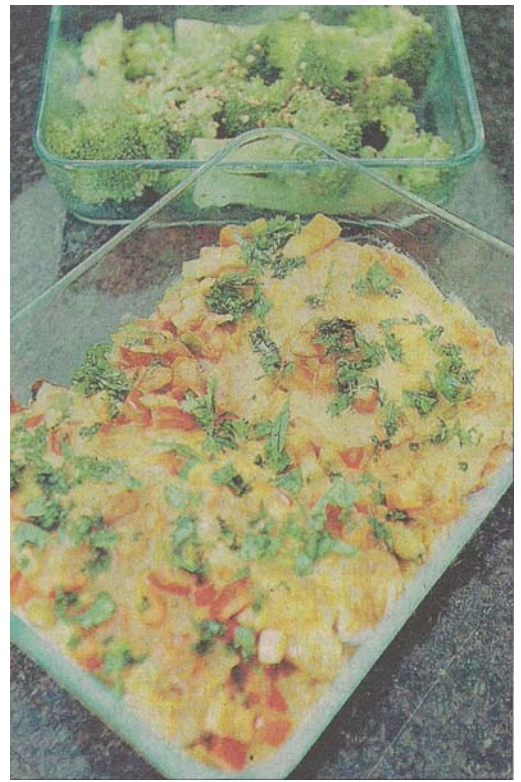
He figured that would provide about 14 to 21 meals at an overall cost of about \$200, including groceries.

"I consider Dianne's service cost-neutral by the time you factor in shopping, cooking and freezing the meals myself," Hughes said.

"My son has the choice of good-tasting, nutritious meals at good portion sizes for him rather than him eating out and eating foods loaded with salt and fat. The meals also provide the opportunity for us to sit down together and talk about the day as we eat."

As have many of the local personal chefs, Chad DeTroye came to his new career from the restaurant and country-club business. However, DeTroye discovered his love of cooking while deployed in the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Shield/Storm in 1990-91.

"Although I was a mechanic, I always liked to help out the cooks when they needed it," DeTroye said. "I didn't realize



The finished Broiled Tilapia dish and a side dish of broccoli as prepared by Dianne Blancato of 123 Cuisine. Blancato moved full time into her personal-chef service in May.

it then, but this would lead to bigger and better things."

After cooking in various food sectors for 10 years, DeTroye opened The Art of Dinner in Mount Airy in 2003, which also offers cooking classes.

"Being a personal chef enables me to do what it is I love, and to help other people in the process," said DeTroye, who has six steady clients that order anywhere from one to 12 meals a month.

"I try to focus on one client a day, which tends to fill up my calendar pretty quickly."

DeTroye said he is making a decent living as a personal chef, but does find it necessary at times to take a part-time job "when times are lean."

Stacy Johnson has been running From Thyme to Time in Winston-Salem for three years, with three steady clients and seasonal customers. She is a graduate of The Art Institute of Colorado.

Johnson said that cooking five entrees, with two portions each, typically runs about \$175 plus the cost of the groceries. The same entrees, with eight portions each, run about \$250 plus the cost of groceries.

"I like this job because it is flexible hours, which is nice for a brand-new mom trying to get work done around taking care of my baby," Johnson said.

Right now, Johnson's business is providing supplemental income into her family's household.

"The main thing I'm trying to convey to potential customers is that this is affordable," Johnson said. "It all depends on what kind of groceries and meals they want."