

The Surprising Rewards of Meal Kits

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Cooking is a slog—or so we are often told, not least by the manufacturers of processed foods who would be quite happy if we never picked up a wooden spoon. Many commentators, including Michael Pollan, have warned that the home-cooked dinner is practically obsolete, a domestic activity that could soon seem as antiquated as darning socks. But here’s a puzzle: If cooking is really on the way out, how do we explain the popularity of meal kit services such as [HelloFresh](#) ?

In the U.S. alone, there are now more than 150 meal-kit businesses, with estimated sales of \$2.2 billion in 2017, according to the food-industry analyst Pentalex. These kits give the lie to the idea that all we care about when eating is convenience. Sure, it’s way more convenient to buy a meal kit than it is to go to a farmers market and pick out each ingredient by hand, before lugging them home, consulting a cookbook and finally cooking dinner. But meal kits are still a far less convenient way of creating a meal than either takeout or microwavable frozen dinners. Users of these kits are paying good money simply to experience a little of the joy of cooking.



The complete pre-packaged makings of a home-cooked meal of shrimp with farro, from HelloFresh. Photo: F. Martin Ramin/The Wall Street Journal, Styling by Anne Cardenas

Meal kits deliver boxes of raw ingredients and recipes and leave the customer to cook up a dinner of curry-spiced cauliflower and squash, say, or sriracha lime cheeseburgers. The kits deliver everything you need down to the last sprig of thyme or teaspoon of smoked paprika. All you usually need to provide is an oven and your own olive oil, salt and water, plus a little light chopping and stirring. “We do the prep. You be the chef” is the slogan for Amazon Fresh. It remains to be seen whether the business model actually works—the high costs of packaging and shipping all those fiddly sprigs of thyme mean that many meal-kit companies have yet to make a profit. Blue Apron, for instance, is struggling with layoffs and a plunging stock price. Yet the idea clearly appeals to an awful lot of people, judging from the fact that meal-kit

spending is growing three times faster than other food sales. According to Nielsen data, 9% of Americans have tried a meal kit, which is huge considering that such services have only been around since 2012.

Critics of meal kits say that they are so dumbed-down that they hardly count as cooking at all. This is cooking for millennials, who lack the calloused fingers or grit of an old-time cook. After all, how hard is it to measure out a teaspoonful of paprika or to go to the store and buy your own onions? In an article in this newspaper in 2017, Jane Black and Brent Cunningham wrote that the Amazon Fresh slogan should really be “We do the prep. You pretend to be the chef.” Black and Cunningham argued that meal kits were yet more proof that “Americans don’t want to cook and never really have.”

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I disagree. To me, the success of meal kits is a sign that more people than ever—including quite a few men, whose fathers never cooked at all—want to cook more passionately than ever before. It’s just that some feel they can only make cooking part of their lives if all the usual obstacles are removed. Few of us, men or women, want to cook like a 1950s housewife any more, churning out dutiful meatloaf. Meal kits give us the chance to cook like children, mixing up mud pies.

I didn’t expect to like meal kits. As a cookbook addict who actually enjoys pounding fresh spices in a mortar, I feared that the meal-kit recipes would be mediocre and that the produce would be out of season. Too often, I was right on both counts. Yet to my surprise, when my family tried a meal kit for a few weeks as research for a book I was writing—first we tried HelloFresh and then a British meal kit firm called Gousto—the whole experience made me look at cooking afresh.

Meal kits taught me once again that the hard part of producing dinner every night isn’t the cooking—it’s all the shopping and schlepping and staring into an inadequately stocked fridge wondering what on earth to make. Cooking is as much about organizing ourselves as it is about applying heat to food. More than half of dinners cooked in the U.S. are planned an hour or less before they are made, according to the Hartman Group, a food consulting firm. The very first week we tried HelloFresh—a dish of Moroccan meatballs—I found myself unexpectedly crying in the kitchen at the wonderful realization that the burden of planning dinner was off my shoulders for once.

Another transformative thing about meal kits is that they tell you exactly the sequence of steps you need to create a whole meal: precisely when to turn on the oven and when to boil a kettle to blanch the green beans. This makes cooking a far more serene process than it usually is. Most recipes in books are great at explaining ingredients but not so great at telling you which pans you will need and when (Julia Child being the exception that proves the rule).

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Meal kit cookery taught me that I wasn't as indispensable in the kitchen as I had arrogantly believed. Like most cooks, I have control freak tendencies and find it hard to relinquish my chopping board. But by following the colorful meal kit recipe cards, my husband and teenage children were able to cook dinner as well as I could. Almost as well.

I was also reminded of how great it feels to have company and encouragement in the kitchen, even if it's only from a recipe card. My 15-year-old daughter said she loved the cheery support she got from those cards as they urged her to "tuck in and smile" or congratulated her on cooking a meal containing three portions of vegetables. The meal kits made cooking seem so aspirational to my teenagers that they would squabble over whose turn it was to cook. I've noticed that even now when we've stopped using the kits, they still cook more than they ever did before. It occurred to me that meal kits could be a great way to deliver cooking skills to households where no one knows how to boil an egg.

I'm still not convinced that meal kits are the future of cooking. One problem is the sheer waste of the packaging. At least the cardboard can be recycled, but what gets me is all the plastic freezer packs to keep the food cold and the tiny doll-sized cartons of tomato purée or cream. Another problem is that the flavors and ingredients are not as good as they could be, at least in the versions that I've tried in the U.K. The sauces tend to taste a little raw, because the recommended cooking times are too short. When I complained about this to Patrick Drake, the co-founder of HelloFresh in the U.K., he told me that most of his customers don't want to spend more than 27 minutes cooking.

My own household has mainly returned to cooking the old-fashioned way, although I've started trying to make it feel more like a meal kit by coordinating my grocery shopping and recipe planning so that I can actually enjoy making dinner. I'm grateful to meal kits for reminding me that, far from being a slog, cooking is one of the great human pleasures.