

FOOD

It's Dinner in a Box. But Are Meal Delivery Kits Cooking?

By KIM SEVERSON APRIL 4, 2016

If you drew up a list of people likely to hate home-delivered meal kits like Blue Apron, Sara Moulton would be on it. She is one of the nation's most enduring recipe writers and cooking teachers, a former food stylist for Julia Child and a dean of food television and magazines in her own right, whose new book is called "Home Cooking 101."

But after two meal kit companies approached her to work with them, Ms. Moulton thought she should investigate. As for anyone who has been paying attention to home-cooking trends, it was hard not to be at least a little meal-kit curious. So she signed up.

"I have to say I was very pleasantly surprised," she said, echoing the sentiment of many very good cooks who have taken the plunge and ordered a box. Ms. Moulton has not decided whether she's going into business with one of the companies, but the kits gave her ideas for recipes. And the best part? She didn't have

to decide what to cook for dinner.

“Making dinner every night really wears thin,” she said. “You bore yourself. Even me.”

In the span of a few short years, more than 100 companies have jumped into the meal kit game. Millions of cardboard boxes arrive on urban and rural doorsteps every month, holding everything one needs to cook dinner, down to the rice wine vinegar and panko.

Ingredients are packaged in exact proportions, ready to be chopped or sautéed according to well-illustrated recipe cards. In less than an hour, even a mediocre cook with salt, pepper and cooking oil can produce an Instagram-worthy meal.

Technomic Inc., a food industry analyst, predicts that at the current rate of adoption, the United States meal kit market could grow by as much as \$5 billion over the next decade. **Blue Apron**, the company that has emerged as the Starbucks of the meal kit business, said it now ships eight million meals a month.

“We’re still a tiny percentage of the overall home cooking world,” said Matt Salzberg, the chief executive of Blue Apron, adding that the company is making money on every shipment. “We don’t know why Blue Apron wouldn’t have a place in every home in America in some way.”

Some analysts say meal kits show classic signs of a bubble that may already be leaking air. They make comparisons to the rise and fall of the grocery delivery service Webvan in the first wave of the tech boom, or meal assembly storefronts, where cooks pick recipes online and then show up to put together what are essentially fancy casseroles from precut ingredients. Such companies once opened at a rate of 40 a month in the early 2000s but have faded from view.

Others say this is different. Like frozen foods or the microwave oven, meal kits may be a kitchen innovation that fundamentally changes how people cook at home.

“Bagged lettuce seemed like a fad, too,” said Jenny Zegler, the global food and drinks analyst for the research company Mintel.

Meal kits seem to have arrived at just the right moment, burrowing deep into the everyday life of a digitally fluent nation whose tastes have been honed on restaurant meals, farmers’ markets and food television. The kits appeal to people eager to learn more about cooking with chickpea flour or organic escarole but less enamored with their procurement.

“There is a feeling of a lack of accomplishment, especially among millennials who feel like it’s a solid effort just to get frozen ravioli cooked and a bagged salad together,” said Melissa Abbott of the Hartman Group, which researches eating patterns. “They say these meal kits are teaching them how to cook so they can participate in the conversation and feel empowered.”

It’s not just younger people. Jennifer Freed, 53, has spent the last 20 years commuting between Los Angeles and New York as she built her business, the film industry accounting firm Trevanna Post. She and her husband, Carl, raised two children, largely with the help of a nanny who cooked. The family had Chinese food on Sunday and went out Saturday night. She might cook a meal a week. Cold cereal or takeout filled the gaps.

With the kids and the nanny gone and her business responsibilities easing, she and her husband needed a new approach to dinner. Her mother signed her up for Blue Apron.

“I thought it can’t be worse than it is now, which is eating Raisin Bran,” she said. She’s been a member of the subscription service for three months, getting three meals a week. On Sundays, her mother and sister-in-law bring over their Blue Apron meal kits, and they cook a dinner party together.

“It hasn’t made me a great cook, but it has made me more confident,” she said.

Michael Pollan, the author whose book “Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation” has been turned into a documentary now streaming on Netflix, counts meal kits as a positive development in cooking culture.

“They are teaching very valuable lessons to people,” he said. “Whether this is a step in a process or an enduring solution to a problem, I don’t know the answer to that.”

Mark Bittman, the cookbook author, left his job as a New York Times columnist in 2015 to join the vegan meal kit company the Purple Carrot in California, which started a year earlier. The first shipment consisted of 93 boxes. Now, the company ships tens of thousands of meals from distribution centers in Los Angeles and New York.

“It is cooking,” Mr. Bittman said. “It’s not shopping and it’s not planning and in a way it’s not thinking, but it is cooking.”

He said he could not predict the financial viability of the concept, or whether it’s a steppingstone on the path back to cooking or a permanent part of the kitchen.

“I don’t think it’s a bubble in the sense that it’s going to blow up and not exist anymore like the first dot-com thing,” Mr. Bittman said. “It may be that if you join our meal kit company and then you learn how to cook and then you don’t need a meal kit anymore, we are a great company.”

The delivery of precurated ingredients is not going away, he and others say. Grocery stores are trying to figure out how to get in the game, and although there are three big meal kit players on the national scene, the regional variations are, by some estimates, more than 100 and growing, each seeming more specialized than the one before.

If you want dinner built largely from food grown by Georgia farmers and recipes from Southern chefs, subscribe to **PeachDish**, which ships nationwide. If you live in Boston and prefer to avoid cross-country shipping, join **Just Add Cooking** and get boxes built with a New England sensibility and delivered by local courier. Devotees of the culinary sensibilities of Northern California can join **Sun Basket**, where one of its owners, Justine Kelly, the former chef de cuisine at Charles Phan's **Slanted Door** in San Francisco, develops the recipes.

She wrote 450 recipes last year, and each month sends out about 150,000 meals like lemongrass- and coriander-crusting pork loin and coconut-almond breakfast smoothies. The price works out to about \$11.49 a meal, which she admitted makes it a luxury item for some. But Ms. Kelly said she has friends who aren't wealthy who use it because the time-cost ratio works in their favor. "Honestly, especially in the Bay Area, it can be cheaper to do a meal kit than shop," she said.

Costs can drop to about \$9 or \$10 a meal with some services, but Ms. Moulton said that is still a lot for some people. "I just don't think it's sustainable for the general population," she said.

Meal kits have also become serious currency in the cross-branding world, with chefs and companies lending their names and recipes. The leader is **Chef'd** in El Segundo, Calif. Unlike most meal kit companies, it does not require a subscription. **Chef'd** has partnerships with 84 chefs and companies. Among them are **The New York Times** and the Crown Publishing imprints **Clarkson Potter** and **Ten Speed Press**, which provide

recipes that the Chef'd culinary team packages into meal kits.

For \$59, you can cook spiced honey glazed duck for four by the San Francisco chef Dominique Crenn. For \$29, two people can have miso-glazed cod vetted by Weight Watchers and guaranteed to cost you only seven points on the company's weight-loss plan.

The one consistent complaint about the kits is what seems to be excessive packaging. The nation's desire for the kits is ahead of the logistics and packaging industries, which are scrambling to keep up.

Many companies provide labels for customers to ship back waste, sanitizing and reusing gel packs and recycling what they can. And companies are working with packing material companies and shippers to reduce both costs and garbage while keeping food cold and safe. But the system is far from perfect.

"We are still in early days here, but when there is that much attention and money being spent for this, there will eventually be compostable insulation or dissolvable insulation you can put into water and turn into dog food or something," said Andy Levitt, who started the Purple Carrot. "Someone will make a dent so people can have access to meal kits without the guilt."

There is also an argument to be made that kits cut down on food waste, gasoline consumption and the boxes and bags in which food enters and leaves the grocery store. As much as 31 percent of America's post-harvest food supply is thrown away, according to an estimate by the Department of Agriculture. Meal kits eliminate that waste, helping people who don't take pleasure in managing a kitchen operate more efficiently and saving gas for those who would have to drive long distances to get the ingredients for a recipe.

"I can't even get fennel or shallots at my local grocery store sometimes," said Toni Byrd, a federal public

defender who lives in Lewisburg, Pa., and who subscribes to the Purple Carrot. “And as a single person, I used to waste food.”

Taylor Hale and Leslie Grove, who live on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, did a lot of soul searching before signing up for a meal kit service recently. He’s a systems engineer at NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center. They grow a lot of their own food, know their local farmers and have started a small coffee roasting and spice business.

They said they would try it for two months, weighing whether the lack of leftovers, which they often throw out, and the time saved shopping balance the cost.

“Obviously I’ll sit down and think about the math for a long time,” Mr. Hale said. “The thing that is the toughest for me is to let go across the board of knowing who grew what I was eating.”

Indeed, at the end of the day it may be that meal kits lack the tribal fire appeal that comes with traditional cooking and shopping. By turning over the recipe and food selection to others, an essential part of the home-cooking experience is lost.

Andrea Nguyen, a cookbook author, provided Vietnamese and dumpling dishes to Chef’d. Still, she isn’t enamored with meal kits because they do not provide the human contact and pleasure that come from hunting for ingredients and exploring the market.

“Cooking is a whole sociological thing,” she said. “I even like talking to the cashiers.”

On a deeper level, relinquishing so much to a company guts the essence of what it means to cook, said Laura Shapiro, a culinary historian who writes about modern cooking in the United States.

“Eating the food cooked by your own hand from your own family and traditions are the things that constitute our emotional life with food,” she said. “I can’t imagine we are going to look back and say, ‘Oh remember that Blue Apron Burmese curry we used to have on Thursdays?’ It’s not the same. It’s not ours. It doesn’t have our family sentiments behind it.”

A version of this article appears in print on April 6, 2016, on page D1 of the New York edition with the headline: It’s Dinner. But Is It Cooking?.

© 2016 The New York Times Company