



FOOD & DRINK

Where to Click for Healthy Meals, Fast

Eating your vegetables is getting easier all the time, thanks to new apps, delivery services and meal planners. We found these three especially tasty



A grain bowl from Sweetgreen PHOTO: SWEETGREEN

By JANE BLACK

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LET'S START WITH the bad news. By now, most of us have given up on our ambitious New Year's resolutions to eat more vegetables. It's too much trouble, not tasty enough—or, often, both. In fact, only 13% of Americans eat the servings of vegetables recommended by the federal dietary guidelines, while a mere quarter get the suggested servings of fruits.

Now, the good news: A host of companies are working on ways to make it easier and sacrifice-free to do the right thing. New services offer ideas and shortcuts to cook vegetarian (and flexitarian) at home, while healthy fast-casual chains are building apps to slash wait times so it's as quick to grab a bowl of freshly made organic greens

and grains as a greasy, processed, drive-through meal. I took a few of the latest eat-healthy tools for a test run, and here's what I found:



A delivery from Purple Carrot contains recipes and all the pre-measured ingredients required to prepare them. PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

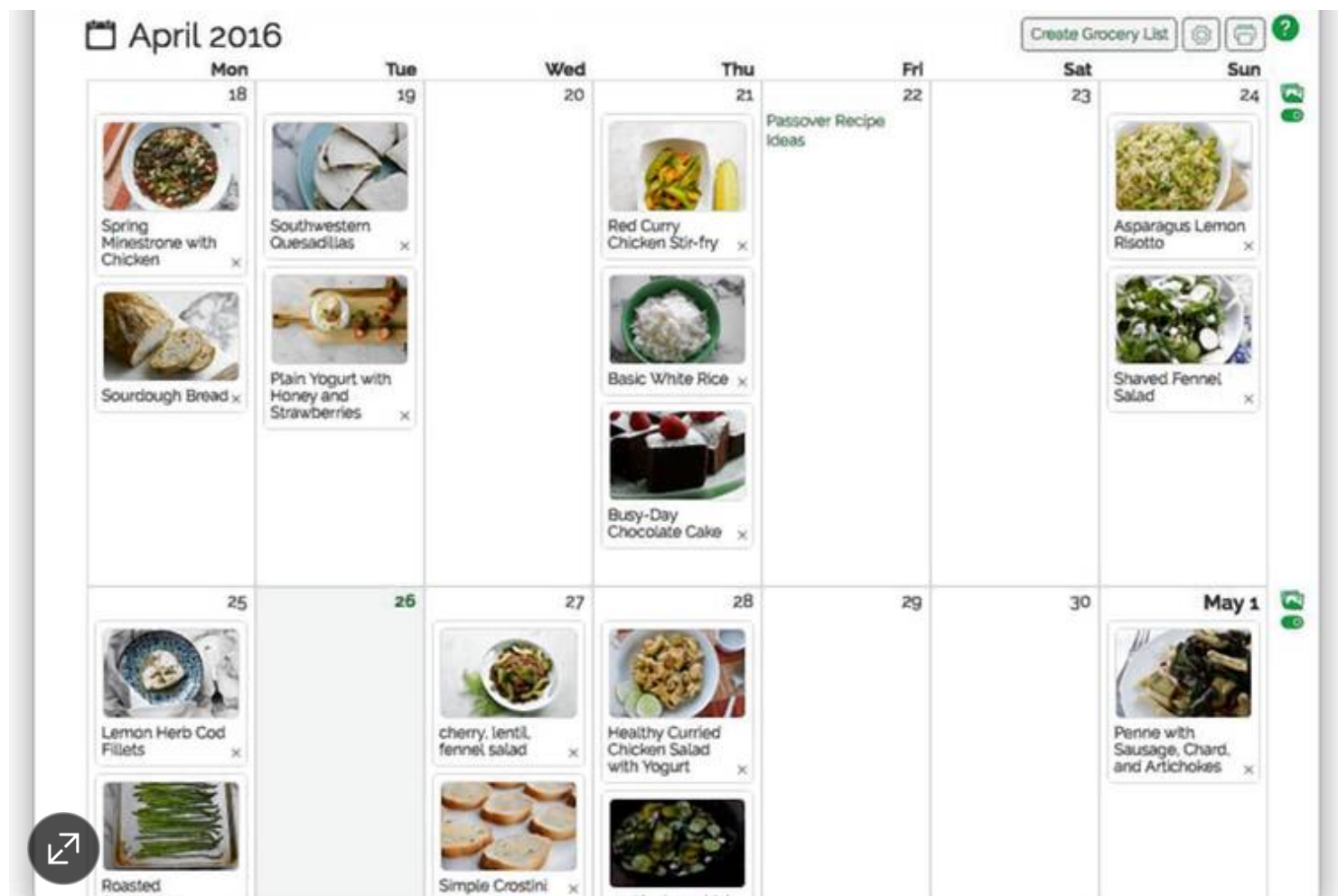
The Meal Kit | The Purple Carrot

I was dreading the Mu Shu, my first dinner from vegan meal-kit service the Purple Carrot, right up until I took a bite. A tortilla wrap of seitan (aka wheat protein), cabbage, prunes, scallions and hot mustard did not sound like Mu Shu anything—or anything good—to me. Boy, was I wrong. Cookbook author and former New York Times columnist Mark Bittman, who helped launch the company, provided genius recipes; let's hope they continue to be this good. He uses smart but easy culinary tricks to make dishes shine. In the Mu Shu, dried mushroom broth added—dare I say it?—a meatiness to the vegetables, and the prunes tasted like a hoisin sauce. (My husband, who had feared dinner even more than I, ate three wraps and the leftover filling for lunch the next day.)

The Purple Carrot, which costs \$68 per week for three meals for two, is similar to other popular meal kits. Like its competitors, it does the troublesome work of deciding for you what's for dinner. (According to research firm the

Hartman Group, 38% of us frequently struggle with what to cook.) The service currently ships throughout the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic and West Coast regions. Each week, a box of pre-measured ingredients arrives at your door so you never have to figure out how to use up the rest of that bunch of basil. In Mr. Bittman's hands, this leads to very good things. A smoky Catalan stew of favas, potatoes and chard was finished with salty caper berries and mint. They were just the sort of garnishes I might have skipped if I wanted to make the recipe but didn't have them on hand. And they are just the things that elevated the dish from good to great.

After two weeks with the service, I had only two complaints: The hefty packaging and a so-called broccoli frittata. It substituted a batter of chickpea flour and water for eggs, and the result was bland and bready. But on the whole the dishes impressed, even amazed. Garlicky greens curry with coconut milk, dates and cashews? If this is vegan, I'm in.



Gathered Table plans meals, provides recipes and shopping lists, and even, in some places, delivers groceries. PHOTO: GATHERED TABLE

The Online Planner | Gathered Table

The burdens of cooking begin long before you set foot in the kitchen. You have to figure out what to make, compose a shopping list, go to the grocery store. Meal planners use technology to affordably solve these problems.

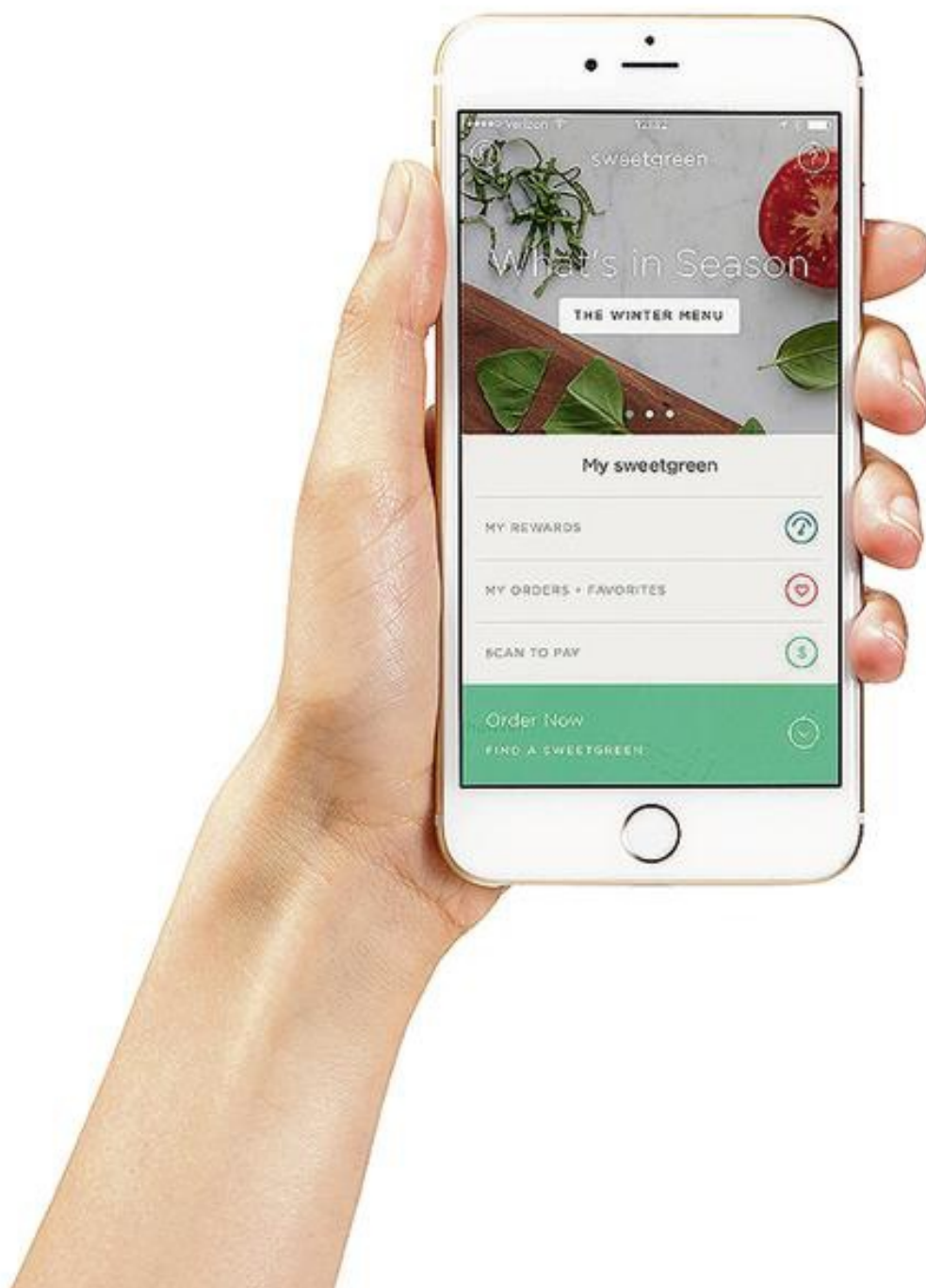
The best I've found is Gathered Table, a website that personalizes meal plans and shopping lists, and, in some areas, even delivers groceries. Gathered Table slashed my meal planning time from an hour or two a week to five minutes. Not bad for \$10 a month.

Here's how it works: Subscribers specify eating habits (omnivore, vegetarian, gluten-free, etc.) and the days and number of meals they want to cook each week. The site then populates a menu for you according to your tastes. My first week of vegetarian eating got me shopping lists and recipes for an apple, lentil and celery salad (hearty

though oddly paired with a corn spoon bread), a Moroccan chickpea stew (warming, satisfying) and a spicy Thai tofu stir fry served with udon noodles.

The dishes weren't quite as sophisticated as Purple Carrot's. But the service is far more flexible and affordable. Unlike with meal kits and many meal-planning competitors, you aren't bound to eat what the service suggests. Instead, you can pick any recipe from Gathered Table's extensive library, subbing in a sweet potato-kale pizza for a salad, or even adding a dessert. You also can clip recipes from the Web, or paste in your own and it will seamlessly update your grocery list. The beauty of Gathered Table is that it not only makes it easy to cook healthfully but also easier to cook, period.

The Takeout App | Sweetgreen



The Sweetgreen app lets you customize orders, pay in advance and more. PHOTO: SWEETGREEN

In the restaurant world, fast-casual is the future. And in the world of fast-casual, the future is the app. Why? Healthy fast food has become so popular that it's often, well, not that fast. At Sweetgreen, Dig Inn, Beefsteak and other growing chains, it's all too common to see lines out the door during peak hours.

Most chains have an app. But Sweetgreen, a Los Angeles-based chain that sells soups, salads and grain bowls, has set a new standard. It allows customers to flag dietary restrictions, add or subtract 86 ingredients (and instantly see how that affects calories and nutrition), pay in advance and know exactly when their meal will be ready for pickup at one of Sweetgreen's 42 locations on the East and West Coasts. I customized my Sweetgreen favorites—Hummus Tahina salad, hold the onions, and the wild-rice-based Harvest Bowl with arugula not kale—and now I can reorder them in a few clicks. The app launched in January, and the company reports that already 25% of sales come from smartphones.

Slick as the app is, what makes it actually work is a redesign of Sweetgreen's stores. They built new prep lines so online orders can be made quickly without jamming the one serving customers in the store. They set up a separate pickup station so online orderers no longer need to interact with the (busy) cashier. (Some stores are still awaiting the upgrade.) The only downside: Now that healthy really is fast, there are few good excuses to resort to a cheeseburger and fries.

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