

Bring back the family dinner

Local restaurants lend a hand with meal planning services

BY DOUG DAVENPORT
Special to the Record-Eagle

Finally there's help for those of us who keep making and breaking the same New Year's resolution each year. You know, the one where we commit to spending more quality time with our family around the dinner table, eating healthier meals.

Main Dish Kitchen and Always Prepared offer meal planning and preparation services tailored for people with hectic schedules. Now it's possible to have a homemade sit-down dinner with the family, even after a late day at work, or before rushing the kids off to hockey practice.

Main Dish Kitchen opened for business two weeks ago in the Cherryland Center. Gene and Joyce Van Koevering are president and vice-president of this franchise operation.

"We were attracted to this opportunity by the highly organized approach to meal preparation," Gene said. "It's perfect for people burdened by crazy schedules. Helping folks rediscover the value of the family dinner table is important to us."

Gene cited a study that determined planning, shopping, preparing, and cleaning up typically requires about 33 hours a month for the average household. At Main Dish Kitchen, up to 12 meals are assembled in 2 hour sessions. These dishes can be selected in servings to accommodate 2-3, or 4-6 people. When it's time for dinner, you simply select what you want from the freezer and follow the cooking instructions. Then sit down together and enjoy.

Have you ever made a resolution to become more community minded and involved in helping others? The Van Koeverings are excited about the Main Dish Kitchen program called "Meals With a Mission."

Participants at group sessions volunteer to spend an additional 10 minutes to prepare one extra meal. Half of the extras

prepared each day are donated to one of Main Dish Kitchen's Charity Partners in the community. The other half are given to participants to distribute to people in need.

Observing a group session, it's obvious that people enjoy socializing with friends while they review menu selections and assemble their meals. At Main Dish Kitchen you'll be encouraged to "enjoy two fun hours with friends in our kitchen and keep yours clean!"

Jeff and Natalie Terrell opened Always Prepared in Tom's East Bay Plaza less than a year ago. They're excited about the reception they've received and the opportunity to impact the way people eat.

"We really value family time and healthy eating", Natalie said. "In our society we depend on drive-thru banks, drive-thru cleaners, drive-thru pharmacies, drive-thru eating ... families need to experience sitting around the table again."

Jeff added, "Eating healthier is another of our valued goals. All our selections are no or low sodium content."

We've all made resolutions to cut down on expenses. Twelve entrees assembled at Always Prepared will provide from 4-6 servings, at an average of about

\$3 per serving. And since the serving sizes are suited to the customer, waste is eliminated.

Saving time is another big priority for working couples and families with children. Since Always Prepared does the menu planning, shopping, preparation, and clean up, it's a smart way to save time while enjoying chef approved entrees that vary from month to month.

"We experimented by shopping as if we were doing it all at home," Natalie said. "After two frustrating hours we weren't done and couldn't even find some special ingredients. That's the hassle we want to eliminate for people who come to Always Prepared. And for a small additional charge, we'll even do all the assembly and packaging for pick-up, if a customer wants us to do it."

Customers like Mary Rogers are typical clients at Always Prepared. As owner of Marigold Productions, Rogers often counsels her own clients to make time to schedule good times for themselves, for employees, and customers. That's why she brought five co-workers to a session at Always Prepared.

"We're preparing meals, but what we're also doing is having a fun night out," Rogers said.



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Ruthanne Kladder of Acme prepares "Holiday Morning French Toast" as her husband, Wayne, prepares a different entree at Always Prepared.



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Diane Kahler and Beatrice Bisser make "Brisket in a Basket" at Main Dish Kitchen.

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