

At Let's Eat!, making dinner is fun and easy

By Jeff Louderback

Tampa, FL – It's a weekday morning, and the kitchen at Let's Eat! brims with activity. Classical music emanates from the speakers, and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee enlivens the air. On their own and in groups, customers start walking through the door for their culinary experience. The regulars slip on their aprons and begin preparing their meals like they are in their kitchen at home. First-timers are given a guided tour of the facility and an easy-to-follow list of instructions from a Let's Eat team member.

Conversation is lively as they transform a station filled with ingredients into gourmet dinners. In less than two hours, the customers feel like Food Network stars as they make more than a month's worth of savory meals like Brie and Mango Chicken, Santa Fe Salmon and Sesame Flank Steak. All will be stored in their home freezer, ready for the oven.

For decades, Americans have consistently searched for ways to make preparing dinner an easier task. The mission has grown even more challenging with mothers juggling careers, a heavier workload at home and shuttling their children to and from after-school activities.

TV dinners were the first option. Then fast food drive-thrus and carry out options at places like McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken debuted. In recent years, casual restaurants like Chili's and Outback have added separate entrances for carry-out.

For Marni Poe and Melissa Slack, these options weren't acceptable. Both the mothers of two toddlers, the longtime friends felt that there was a need for a sanctuary where parents like themselves could simplify the dinner making process, put healthier and tastier food on the table, and save valuable time and energy. So, instead of searching for a solution, they created one.

Let's Eat - which Poe and Slack opened in 2004 – is a meal preparation business that is fulfilling Americans' desires to dine at home without actually preparing the meals there. Americans are cooking less and less, according to NPD Group, a marketing research company. Yet they still need to eat, and many prefer to do so around the dinner table with home-cooked meals.

“Many of us have to multi-task with our careers, families and home responsibilities, so we struggle to put food that tastes good and is healthful on the table,” said Poe, who is co-owner of Let's Eat and is the mother of Lane, 2, and Reese, 5. “People want to have more meals at home, but often they don't have the time in their schedule to cook.

“Let’s Eat is all about convenience,” she added. “All the ingredients, containers and measuring spoons are at your fingertips. We do all the dirty work, and you get all the glory.”

Let’s Eat is like a combination of an immaculately designed commercial kitchen and a TV cooking show set. The space includes 14 food preparation stations with all the ingredients, utensils and accessories customers need to prepare their meals from the Let’s Eat menu, which is crafted each month by executive chef Loren Falsone. In a two-hour session, customers can make eight to 12 dinners, all of which can be frozen and eaten later. Most of the meals are entrees, but each month there are also side items and dessert features. Each dish serves four to six people at \$3 to \$5 per serving. The cost for eight meals is \$145, or \$18 a dinner. Twelve meals cost \$199, or \$16.50 a dinner.

The concept immediately struck a chord with Falsone who was about to become a first-time mom and had spent most of her culinary career preparing health-conscious cuisine.

“I think it’s a great concept for people like me who are struggling to add more balance to their lives, to have more time with their families,” she said.

As the executive chef for Let’s Eat, Falsone is responsible for developing the palate pleasing entrees. Let’s Eat! menu items include entrees like Herb Crusted Pork Tenderloin; Lobster Ravioli and Chicken Picatta, meals that take only 6 to 10 minutes to prepare with the help of Let’s Eat!

Falsone-Brassil’s credentials are impressive. She was recognized as *Food and Wine Magazine’s* “Top Ten Best New Chefs,” nominated for Ivy Award for *Restaurants and Institutions* and was featured in *Condé Nast Traveler’s* “60 Hot Tables” World’s Most Exciting New Restaurants. She received her culinary training at Johnson and Wales University.

Just as exceptional cuisine is an important element of the Let’s Eat concept, so is simplicity. Customers register for day or evening, weekday or weekend sessions at www.letseatdinner.com. The web site offers in-depth information on what to expect, and Let’s Eat team members walk customers through the process before each session. While Let’s Eat! offers meal the whole family will enjoy, each monthly menu always includes a particularly kid-pleasing meal. All you need to bring is a cooler to carry your meals home, but if you forget, there are bags available.

“What makes our concept especially appealing is that the planning, shopping, prep work and clean up is done by someone else,” said Slack, who is the mother of Jake, 1, and Avery, 4. “It’s time consuming and physically draining to find a recipe, go to the grocery store and get the ingredients, and then come home to find the containers and measuring spoons, and then finally make dinner.

“Let’s Eat eliminates that burden,” she added. “You come in and everything is waiting for you, and you have a good time while you are here.”

For Poe and Slack, the creation of Let's Eat was simply about seeing a niche and filling it. Poe, an attorney by trade, and Slack, who was a computer software company executive before becoming a stay-at-home mom, are opening two more company-owned locations in the Tampa area – one in Westchase this summer and another in Brandon this fall. The duo sold recently sold two franchises to be opened in St. Petersburg and Clearwater. They plan to have 245 franchised locations within five years. The franchise fee is \$25,000.

“We knew from the beginning that ours is a concept that would be appealing for people looking to operate their own business,” Poe said. “One of our first customers told us that every city should have a Let's Eat. We hope to make that a reality.