



Clockwise from top, cheese, raspberry and almond tart, and orange couscous from The Food Ferry

The boil-in-the-bag dinner party

Online food delivery services are expanding into 'gourmet' ready-made meals, with mixed results, writes Caroline Phillips

I've dusted the Kitchen Aid with flour and switched on the Gaggenau steam oven, both accoutrements of the serious cook. But in this instance, they're simply the *mise en scène* for pretending that I've cooked dinner for my expected guests. Tonight we're dining on salmon tartare and delicate scallop terrine, then prime tuna steak with spicy Italian sauce and aubergine "cake", followed by tarte au citron and a chocoholic fest of triple chocolate dessert. Yum. "Serious food for serious gourmets," in the words of the Cornucopia Foods catalogue.

We're feasting on ready-prepared food, ordered online or by phone.

Cornucopia's ready-cooked dishes are made by a "revolutionary" process, *sous vide*, which means "under vacuum" and involves cooking dishes in their own juices in sealed vacuum pouches. Well, that's the theory.

The Cornucopia service is prompt and cheerful, and meals are sent by courier within 24 hours for a standard UK dispatch fee of £8.50. Unusually, the grub is mostly supplied frozen in plastic pouches. In fact, all you need in order to entertain guests is a saucepan of boiling water. The host simply re-heats the bags gently - main courses are cooked in eight minutes.

And so to dine on our Cornucopia banquet. There are eight guests around the table, from a leading lawyer to Greek ship-owner, newspaper editor and squillionaire businessman, and us, their sanguine, relaxed hosts. I haven't even had to cut a single vegetable and have every intention of pretending that I've made the dinner - until I taste it. The terrine tastes like goldfish-infused polystyrene. The thawed tartare is marginally better.

Now to the main course. The food is supplied in individual pouches, one serving per bag. If you're serious about cheating, how do you hide the packaging? John Gordon, mastermind behind such hotly debated topics as the merits of monogamy in the

Intelligence Squared debates at the Royal Geographical Society, comes to the rescue, helping to pluck 20 bags from the saucepan, holding them in his asbestos-like fingers and bravely scissoring them open.

Eventually the unreconstructed aubergine (which formerly resided in 10 separate bags) and the fish (lukewarm after the lengthy, revolutionary scissoring process) reach the table. The tuna tastes reconstituted.

"Is this chicken?" asks Mrs Gordon. This meal turns out to be cuisine *minceur* - but only by default.

We fare better on another night when we have a dinner party catered by The Food Ferry. This is lucky, since we're entertaining London's leading litigator. The food is delivered in a smart blue freezer bag (to the house, not the table). Fois gras and Poilâne country bread, Moroccan lamb tagine accompanied by orange couscous and rocket salad followed by raspberry and almond tart and fresh fruit. The Food Ferry cooks food without additives or preservatives, often uses organic, seasonal produce and fresh dishes are prepared every day to order. The tagine, made from an authentic Moroccan recipe (except for the Welsh lamb), is delicious, sweet and spicy. The fresh, organic fruit is excellent.

It's all a long way from the early days of fast food delivery. Today there are endless businesses delivering television dinners, food for empty-fridge syndrome and nosh for up-all-nights in the office. But the growing trend is said to be for gastro food for dinner parties. "We've reshaped our business from just supplying the ingredients to providing ever more finished products," confirms James Millar, co-founder of The Food Ferry. Ready-made meals account for 10 per cent of its £2m turnover.

The trend for buying in more gastro food may have been spurred by a ceaseless diet of TV chefs. "We're about to start hitting the dinner party circuit hard," concurs Rohan Blacker, co-founder of Deliverance,

London's biggest cuisine delivery service. It caters 15,000 meals, including 40 dinner parties, every week to customers who are, typically, affluent thirtysomethings.

It's a viable alternative to restaurant dining and more economical than eating out or hiring caterers: on average a three-course Cornucopia meal costs £16 a head. It's also easier than going to the shops.

"We all know we should be spending more time in the kitchen, preparing delicious healthy food," adds Cornucopia's Rupert Cotterell. "But life gets ever more stressful and it's increasingly hard to find time to shop, let alone cook exceptional dishes."

The Food Ferry, which is against supermarkets and has been crusading since 1990 to make people aware

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of local, seasonal food and small, quality producers, is a one-stop destination. It provides fresh dishes, prepared to order. (Think lobster fishcake, artichoke and Parma ham quiche, red mullet in saffron and French apple tart.) It has cornered the London market: clients are 75 per cent London households, mostly busy families. "Nigella [Lawson] has an organic box chosen every week to avoid thinking about what on earth to cook," says Millar. "And she buys ready-made pasta sauces from us." Its prices are 10 per cent higher than the main supermarkets, but at least 25 per cent cheaper than London restaurants.

By contrast, Cornucopia, which sells thousands of ready meals every year, delivers mostly to customers

who live outside the city. "Many of our clients live in places where access to more sophisticated food is limited," says Cotterell, whose most popular dishes are classics such as coq au vin and beef carbonades (£4 a head). "Recently, someone took loads of Cornucopia food to the Falkland Islands to add a bit of variety to a rather restricted menu. People have parcels delivered to Highland and island holiday houses. And many people stock up their freezers with our ready-meals."

You don't need to know how to cook to enjoy really good food at home. And the preconception that a ready-prepared meal is necessarily a quality compromise is wrong. At the other end of the spectrum, companies such as Dining Made Easy have replaced the man in a white fish van - the white-van drivers who cold-call, mainly in rural areas, but who have virtually disappeared since the foot-and-mouth crisis. The company delivers frozen food sourced from catering suppliers by van all over the South-west. Ten per cent of its customers are elderly and need convenience food delivered. But it has also captured the pub and curry house market - think salmon and broccoli crispbake, boil-in-the-bag duck curry and microwave-friendly stir-fry noodles cooked from frozen. It sold 40,000 meals last year.

Insiders predict that internet food shopping will grow dramatically, and that posh dinner-party take-aways are set to become an increasingly present feature of lucrative lifestyles. After all, what did Gavyn Davies (former BIC chairman whose stake in Goldman Sachs is worth about £80m) announce as his first business move since resigning? Why, to invest in Deliverance...

DETAILS

Info: www.cornucopiafoods.co.uk
www.dining-made-easy.co.uk
www.foodferry.com
www.deliverance.co.uk