Box It Up! Is Subscription Food Delivery Worth the Money?

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Once upon a time, anyone who wanted to prepare a special meal had to first track down a recipe and then trek to the grocery store for the necessary components.

But these days, you can skip right ahead to the mixing and marinating, thanks to such services as Plated and Blue Apron, which bring ready-to-cook dinners—complete with detailed instructions and just the perfect amount of ingredients—to your doorstep.

But are they worth the cost? And are the results both tasty and healthy?

A growing number of people seem to think so, given that several of these companies have taken off in just the past few years. HelloFresh, for example, claims to have delivered more than 10 million meals internationally since 2012—in the U.S. alone, their business more than quadrupled in 2013.

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"Many people say they want to cook more, eat healthy and waste less," says Seth Goldman, C.E.O. of the U.S. division of HelloFresh. "And we provide a convenient way to do it."

The Skinny on Subscription Food Services

While signing up for a subscription food service hardly means never setting foot in a supermarket again—you only receive meal kits for a few dinners per week—it can provide the tools and encouragement to experiment with new fare at a reasonable cost. Prices for subscription food services range from about $10 to $15 per serving.

"They allow you to have a 'restaurant' quality meal at home for much less money, and you won't have to stock your pantry with unfamiliar spices that you might never use again," says Keri Gans, R.D., author of "The Small Change Diet."

Jackie Newgent, R.D., a culinary nutritionist and author of "The With or Without Meat Cookbook," believes that these services are also well worth the price because they foster kitchen confidence. "Cooking can be a relaxing and enjoyable activity," she says. "It's a lovely learning experience to share with family too."

The downside, however, is that most of these plans aren't great for picky eaters. Although some allow you to customize your choices a little, flexibility is limited. PeachDish, in fact, sends all subscribers the same meals, emphasizing the "adventure" aspect, and urging people to think of it as a yearlong cooking course.

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