



CONVIVIUM'S HOMEFRESH PREPARED MEAL SERVICE

BY BRYCE PARKS

Convivium's HomeFresh Prepared Meal Service was next up on our tour of local dining anyway, so what are the odds that we'd suddenly find ourselves self-quarantining and avoiding dine-in restaurants just as their story hits the paper? And what a better time to discover fresh, locally-sourced, ready-to-eat meals than right now? Just two weeks ago, we were able to sample six of the great prepared meals from Convivium's HomeFresh Prepared Meal Service. How would we know that so soon after, the idea of "dining out" without going into a shared public space would be our new normal for a while?

Whether it's this crisis or just the hustle and bustle of everyday life, Convivium's HomeFresh prepared meal service is a healthy, local answer to the perpetual question "What's for dinner?"

The service is a joint effort between Convivium Urban Farmstead and City Girl Farming, an organic farm, catering, and event service dedicated to reconnecting food and people. City Girl Farming is run by Dubuque resident Justyna Miranda, who has over 15 years experience in the restaurant and hospitality business. It was only natural that she and Dubuque's urban garden would find each other. Justyna also has a culinary background. She already grows in majority for Brazen Open Kitchen's organic vegetables and worked on chef Kevin Scharpf's team for over a year as a prep cook and a baker honing her skills.

Leslie Shalabi tells *365ink* that the idea has been on Convivium's radar for some time following onto all of the national food prep services that are springing up. They are all about being local, and that means utilizing local suppliers, reducing carbon footprint, reducing packaging costs, and recycling packaging, which is a criticism of those big, national food kit programs.

The prepared meal service offers fresh, unique weekly dinner packages for your table or freezer. These are not meal kits like you might receive in the mail where you have to cook it, but rather fully prepared meals that require minimal preparation (preheat oven, warm through, and serve). Each meal comes with preparation instructions and nutrition information.

They provide the recipes, do all of the food shopping, prep and clean up, and avoid the mess in your kitchen and line at the grocery store!

SAMPLE ENTRÉES

- Sesame Chicken Salad: Chicken cooked in a house made soy-ginger-sesame dressing, served over mixed greens with cherry tomatoes, red onion and mandarin segments.
- Salisbury Steak: Served with house made gravy, mashed potato and peas.
- Veggie Coconut Stir Fry with Shrimp: Rich and flavorful, packed with veggies and shrimp. Served with side of rice.
- Salad Nicoise: Inspired by French Classic it is a Tuna salad. Made with tuna in olive oil over spring greens, with farmers market red potatoes, our Convivium fresh eggs, green beans, Kalamata olives, cherry tomatoes, pickled red onions and house made vinaigrette dressing.
- Veggie Lasagna Stuffed Portobello Mushroom: Portobello mushrooms stuffed with spinach, bell peppers, cheese and marinara sauce—a delicious meatless meal that's low-carb, keto diet friendly and gluten free. Served over a bed of greens and maple balsamic dressing on the side.
- Polish Kielbasa Sausage and Sauerkraut Dinner: Polish sausage pan roasted with potatoes, cauliflower, apple slices and sauerkraut. Seasoned with fresh thyme and paprika.

In giving locals the opportunity to have freshly-prepared, locally-sourced meals without the hassle, and on their own schedule, they let the garden dictate the menu. Whenever they have the opportunity, they pack the local produce into the meals. The food that is cooked is picked at its peak ripeness, often just hours before it's used to prepare the meals. It makes a difference in flavor and nutritional value. Exposing people to this is exciting to the crew making it happen and truly makes a difference.

HOW IT WORKS

The meals can only be purchased as part of a 3-for-2 or 4-for-4 package. A 3-for-2 package means you can pick three different meal options for 2 people (total of six entrées) for \$71. A 4-for-4 entrée option is designed for four people (16 total entrées) for \$168. That rounds to about \$10 to \$12 per meal. A 3-for-2 package might, for example, be for a couple or a single person to meal prep for a week or even coworkers who split the package for

lunches. This could be a dream come true for healthy singles who don't have the time to spend cooking or who are just plain terrible cooks. And what a dream for empty nesters or seniors who don't like cooking for one.

A new menu of six fresh options is placed online each Monday and you have until noon on the Thursday of that week to place your order from those six choices. You then pick-up that order on Wednesday of the following week. The menus change continuously, always keeping in mind to have keto and vegan options available. At this stage it is a pick-up only service, but if the demand is there, delivery could become an option. With the current self-quarantining going on, this could happen sooner than later.

"We think this is our time to shine," Justyna tells us. "There's a lot of people who have not heard about us yet. We'd like to be able to reach new customers who can really take advantage of this."

"We've been doing this since June, and it's going well," adds Convivium's Leslie Shalabi. "We have a good processes in place that's been steadily growing with regular customers and new ones adding every week. We receive rave reviews all the time. The quality of the food is very high and it's always presented very nicely. You can have it at home or easily take it to work. All of the portions are individually packaged. Just heat it and eat it."

The packaging is returnable and recyclable. They give people a deposit on their packaging of the main entrée containers.

It's a healthy, nutritious, home-cooked, whole-food, restaurant-quality meal. It's not a discount frozen entrée. If you don't get that, this isn't for you. If you understand the value of what you're getting, it's a no-brainer.

Visit convivium-dbq.com/prepared-meal-service for more information. For questions, call 563-557-2900 or email info@convivium-dbq.com. ■

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2811 JACKSON ST, DUBUQUE, IA
563-557-2900
INFO@CONVIVIUM-DBQ.COM
CONVIVIUM-DBQ.COM/PREPARED-MEAL-SERVICE

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