

Dinner's Best-Kept Secret

Two Kentucky businesses find success
by making meal prep easier

BY JENNIFER THORNBERRY

A new entrepreneurial concept captured the attention of three Kentucky women in 2003, and they became part of a food service niche that's capturing attention across the nation.

Lexington caterer Harriet Dupree Bradley read a story in *Working Mother* magazine in February 2003 about two women who started Dream Dinners, a meal assembly service in Washington.

Meal assembly, a sort of restaurant-meets-deli experience where customers put together meals that can be frozen and stored to be cooked weeks or months later, seemed like a good fit for Bradley: She already had a commercial kitchen and a 20-year background as a chef and caterer. So she decided to launch her own meal assembly business, and later that year, *Entrée Vous* was born.

Meanwhile in Louisville, working moms Maureen Heideman and Beth Zadik tried something they had read about – taking one day a month to cook large meals and freeze them for later. They found that it was a lot of prep work, and cookbook recipes weren't that tasty. But the convenience of pulling a homemade meal from the freezer and popping it into the oven was hard to pass up, so they started developing and testing their own recipes.

Long story short, they opened the doors to their own meal assembly business, *Ready for Dinner*, in October 2003.

According to the Easy Meal Prep Association, a Wyoming-based trade group, the meal assembly industry was just getting started in 2003, with total revenue of \$7.2



Lee Thomas photo

million. Now, there are 894 outlets and 318 different meal assembly companies nationwide. Industry revenues were \$117 million in 2005 and are projected to be \$270 million this year. By 2010, the association projects that revenues will top \$1 billion.

"It's really interesting how it's grown, both in quantity and in revenues," said Amy Vasquez, a representative of the Easy Meal Prep Association. "Eventually, it will slow down once it gets saturated, but there's still so much room for growth."

The typical meal assembly customers are working moms, but singles and empty nesters also like it. Customers can go to the company's Web site, select six to 12 family-sized entrees from a menu and signs up for a time slot to make them. They then go to the meal assembly kitchen and spend about two hours assembling

Meal assembly kitchens like *Entrée Vous* fill a niche at dinnertime, helping busy working moms bring tasty, nutritious meals home to their families.

the entrees at stations equipped with pre-sliced and prepared ingredients. The entrees go home, are frozen, and cooked later.

The average meal assembly business owners also are professional women with families, such as Bradley, Heideman and Zadik.

"It's a great opportunity for women," said Paul Martino, *Entrée Vous*' chief operating officer.

It takes a modest investment and a small staff, offers family-friendly hours, and doesn't take a lot of revenue to work. The meal assembly model starts to work at 30 to 40 customers a week, with an average order of \$150, and the

To find out more about Kentucky's meal assembly businesses:

Entrée Vous
www.entreevous.com

Ready for Dinner
www.readyfordinner.com

owner can choose which days she wants to offer time slots to customers, Bradley said.

Comparatively, the average fast food restaurant needs \$200,000 a week in sales to break even and requires a large crew and long hours, Martino said.

When Bradley brought the meal assembly concept to Lexington, her initial plan was to open several Entrée Vous kitchens regionally, but she and Martino decided instead to go for a national franchising campaign.

Three franchises opened in 2005 – one in Louisville and two in Michigan – and 24 franchisees are slated to open this year. They expect to have 100 kitchens under development by the end of this year, Bradley said, and they hope to open 150 stores a year for the next five years.

Bradley said it's too early to tell what her annual revenue figures will be – her Entrée Vous kitchen in Lexington just opened in April, and the oldest franchise is just coming up on its one-year anniversary – but she is optimistic.

Bradley focuses on quality, spending 75 percent of the company's resources on food development. She has commercial ovens and ranges installed in every kitchen and make sauces from scratch. "It makes our startup costs higher, but it's worth it," she said.

"Our goal is to be the gold standard in the meal assembly business because of our food and the way we take care of our franchisees," Bradley said.

Heideman wants Ready for Dinner to make dinnertime as convenient as possible for as many people as possible. Heideman has no current plans to expand or franchise; her goal for now is to see her kitchen keep growing.

The business averages around \$250,000 in sales per year. "I feel good. It's steady and growing," she said.

Heideman and Zadik emphasize customer choice, with five different package levels, a choice of meats per dish and options for dietary requirements.

"I give them as many decision-making options as possible to go with their lifestyle," Heideman said. "By having them put the dish together themselves from start to finish, there is the flexibility of customizing."

"We're really happy with the way things are going," she said. "And there's competition in the market, which puts an interesting twist on things."

Both businesses face a common challenge: building awareness.

As the original meal assembly business in the Lexington market, Entrée Vous has had to market the concept itself and the company. "Even as long as we've been here, you find a lot of people who don't know what meal assembly is all about," Martino said.

Ready for Dinner was the first meal assembly kitchen in Louisville, and Heideman agrees that educating people on the concept is "one of the biggest challenges we face."

Dream Dinners, one of the biggest national brands with more than 100 kitchens, now has one kitchen each in Lexington and Louisville, which heats up the competition for Entrée Vous and Ready for Dinner. But this competition will help bring attention to the industry.

"The benefit is it gets the concept out there. The flip side is that it divides the market that much more," Heideman said.

The established businesses now face the challenge of convincing new and existing customers to come to them.

Entrée Vous will continue to emphasize its food quality. "If there's an Entrée Vous, a Dream Dinners and a Super Suppers in the same neighborhood, we want to have the best food," Martino said.

Heideman is concerned that if a customer has a less-than-positive experience at one meal assembly kitchen, they may not try others. "If they try one of the competitors and don't like it, it's a challenge to get them to try me," she said.

Even with these challenges, Entrée Vous and Ready for Dinner are holding their own and are optimistic about the future.

Heideman said building a successful business is about listening to your customers and being as accommodating as possible, while still making a profit. "You want to make it as easy as possible for them to stay a customer," she said.

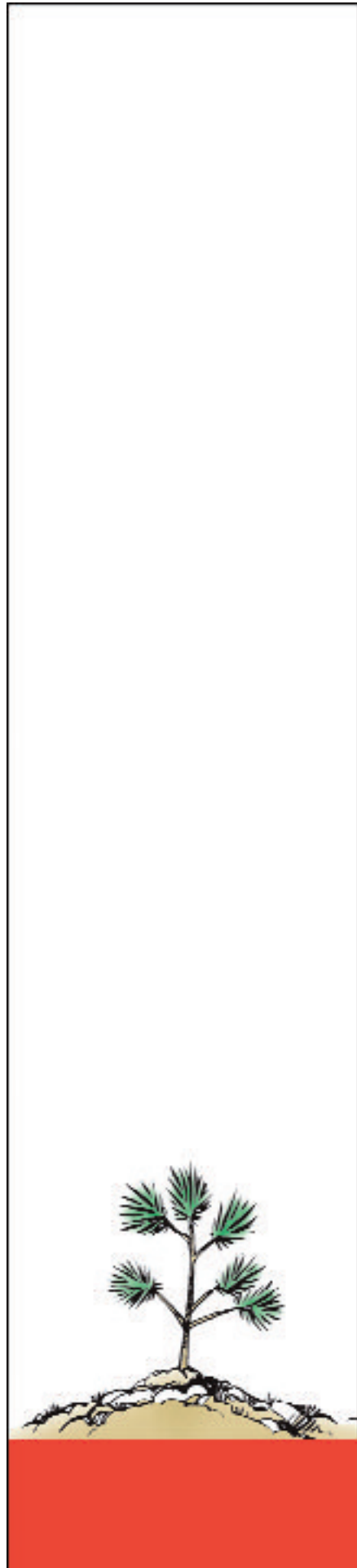
Bradley said it's about being ready to go all the way, or not do it all. "Trust your gut, get a whole lot of advisors, then jump off the cliff," she said. "There's a personality that is risk-friendly and one that is risk-adverse. Know yourself before you get into business."



Entrée Vous founder
Harriet Dupree Bradley



Ready for Dinner
co-owner
Maureen Heideman



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