



Updated: Tue., Apr. 24, 2012, 12:53 PM

Dinner is served

By DOREE LEWAK

Last Updated: 12:53 PM, April 24, 2012
Posted: 11:22 PM, April 23, 2012

David Wallace is pulling off a major feat in Park Slope: He's soothing a cranky toddler while serving his delectable crustless mini-quiches. Across the living room, mom Sara Marcus is chowing down, conducting an informal taste test — "David, these weren't that brown last time!" she calls out.

Candidate for husband of the year? Nope. Wallace, 37, doesn't live here. He's the personal chef the Marcus family hired to make life easier for Sara, a 35-year-old Web entrepreneur who works from home; her husband, film editor Dave, also 35; and their son, Gabriel, 16 months old.

While the mere phrase "personal chef" might evoke images of starched white toques and meals served on silver trays, a growing number of middle-class New Yorkers are now going this route.

Though Wallace declines to list his rates, the Private Chef NYC, an independent company that offers nearly identical services, has a flat rate of \$350 a week, not including the cost of groceries — and promises five dinners' worth of food. Rates vary with skill, time and the volume of food produced, but most citywide fees tend to fall between \$150 and \$450 for a private chef's labor for several days' worth of food — not including the cost of ingredients. Wallace insists that his weekly services will cost a family of four less money than it would for them to get takeout during the week.

Families yearning for less greasy-Chinese takeout and more healthy, satisfying fare are even taking their pleas to Craigslist, where inquiries into private chefs at a bargain proliferate on the boards.

One recent posting advertised a private chef of 20 years named Katie, who would cater to any dietary need — and was willing to cook for vegans and carnivores alike: "Brazilian coconut dish that is just to die for! Stews, lasagna, meatballs!" With recession-chic prices — \$120 for six hours and seven dishes — it appears anyone's dietary dreams can come true.

"One of my best clients is a nurse whose schedule is backwards because she works the night shift," says Rolise Rachel, a private chef who is in her mid-30s. "She tells me all the time she doesn't know what she'd do without me."

Rachel has worked in kitchens from the Hamptons to South Beach over the past 15 years, but she feels most gratified when she's in this nurse's one-bedroom apartment in Midtown, dishing up healthy fare that includes chicken and turkey burgers, and premade salads for the week. Her rates are on a sliding scale from \$35 to \$50 per hour — which means that dishes, including her signature tom ka gai soup (chicken stock, coconut milk, lemon juice, red curry paste, ginger and cilantro) — are very much within reach of most budgets.

The trained chef from Greenwich Village has been building her middle-class client list steadily over the past few years and notices the rising demand due to frustration over poor diet and no time to cook. "My clientele demographic has completely changed," she says. She now cooks for "people who own minivans," stay-at-home moms and accountants.

"Let's not kid ourselves: Having a personal chef is a luxury. If it weren't, we'd all have one, right? But basically everyone is middle-class," says Wallace of his clients, who are mostly two-working-parent households and live either in Brooklyn or Manhattan. "The real victim of two working parents is the home-cooked meal," says Wallace, who started his company, *Me in Your Kitchen*, last year. "[Now] I'm enabling people to have a home-cooked meal, whether it's cooked by them or not."

Wallace calls it a "public service" to help clients such as super-stressed Park Slope mom Sara Marcus, whose family eats gluten-free.

"My niche is suited to people who are [financially] comfortable, but still looking at their budget."

Cindy is another private chef devotee in Park Slope who enjoys experiencing how the other half lives, even though she swears she's not part of said group. She's loath to use her real name, for fear of friends assuming there's a sudden windfall that Cindy promises does not exist.

"It's not something I broadcast, because it sounds indulgent," she says. But with two young boys (ages 1½ and 4) and both she and her husband working full time (she in financial services, he in media), she says shopping, planning and cooking weren't viable options on the table anymore.

"At first it was fun to think I could have anything I wanted — homemade chicken pad thai!" she says of the notion of whipping up any favorite on whim. "But now I'm enjoying having David do all of the meal planning, and taking one more item off my weekly to-do list. He can cook anything — from matzo ball soup to fish tacos. It's amazing to come home on a wintry night to a shepherd's pie or meat stew."

Private chefs make a lot more money than they would on the line, which can be as humbling as \$10 per hour for even a trained chef. A private chef, on the other hand, can net six figures with a healthy stable of weekly clients in NYC, according to Elliott Prag, an instructor at the Natural Gourmet Institute in Chelsea. Of the roughly 180 students the school graduates each year, Prag estimates about half enter the private-cooking world. He attributes the bump in working private chefs to the renewed need to adjust to the explosion of food allergies, restrictions and movements.

"People want a private chef to prepare the latest special diets

[gluten-free, paleo, raw]," he says. "The diets change over time, but there's always a new diet that people need help

cooking.”

Indeed, those seeking a private chef often do so for health reasons, which is where Hanna Robinson comes in. The 30-year-old private chef has been promoting her healthy fare as a private chef around the city for the past two years. The Upper East Sider calls her clients “down-to-earth” working families who make health-conscious eating a priority.

“I’ve been pleasantly surprised by the demand, considering where the economy is, but the demand is definitely there,” she says.

“People still need to budget, but now they budget for healthy food.”

Tova Gold, a mom of two girls under 4 in Teaneck, NJ, winces when she thinks about the day when she’s without her personal chef, Dawn Scapicchio. “If Dawn leaves, we’re in big, fat trouble,” says Gold, 35, of the chef who has come twice a week for the past two years. Gold and her husband, an SEO expert and acupuncturist, first started using a private chef when she was pregnant with her second child, as a way to start eating healthy. Scapicchio generally prepares six or seven dishes twice a week for the vegan-only Golds, who request lots of quinoa, kale and fennel. Her sweet potato arame fritters are a family favorite.

“It’s the smartest thing we ever did,” admits the art director and founder of Finding My Muchness, a Web site for women.

“She comes, she cooks, she cleans, she leaves.”

Gold smartly sidestepped the sticker shock of many NYC-area private chefs by working with someone who moonlights as one — sans the training.

“Dawn’s a graphic designer by trade, but she’s also a vegetarian who shares our sensibilities and loves to cook,” Gold says of the near-perfect financial and gastronomic arrangement found via Craigslist — and chalks up the comparatively modest expense to “baby-sitting money.” For the Golds, it’s “cheaper than ordering in anything other than pizza.”

Yet it’s still a luxury many clients don’t just have to justify to their circles, but to themselves.

“Hiring a personal chef is definitely a big expense for us,” says Marcu, “but one that we’ve made sure to budget for, and one that we feel is well worth the cost.”

And the best part about having a private chef? “I never have to do the dishes.”