

One meal at a time? That's so 2008

BY LIANE FAULDER, THE EDMONTON JOURNAL

JANUARY 7, 2009

They were three working mothers with 11 children among them, and dinner time was turning into an awful lot of trouble.

"We were all doing hockey and swimming and soccer and violin and we were finding we were coming in the door at 5 p.m., frantically thinking what we were going to do for supper," recalls Lorelei Thomas, a teacher and one of the authors of the bestselling cookbook *The Big Cook*.

The solution -- pre-cooking meals together in bulk -- turned out to be a rewarding effort that has not only changed the lives of these three mothers from Medicine Hat, but also provided solutions for thousands of households across Canada facing the same dinner dilemma.

"And the other neat thing is that we had fun doing it," recalls Thomas in a phone interview from her home. "We weren't by ourselves with the drudgery. We did our grocery shop together, and some pre-meal preparation, and it evolved from there."

Since *The Big Cook* was self-published in 2006, the trio -- Thomas, Deanna Siemens and Joanne Smith -- has sold more than 28,000 copies and has even made the book table at Costco, surely a sign that they are on to something.

The Big Cook provides recipes for meals that can be made in advance, in large quantities, and frozen. The idea is to get together with a few friends (more than four gets awkward) and cook up to 12 recipes for different dishes. Everybody takes home a variety of freezer meals, most of which are not pre-cooked, lending a fresher feel to the evening meal for weeks, or months, to come.

The first time Thomas, Siemens and Smith got together to cook, way back in 1997, they came away from the effort with 20 meals each and were totally sold on the concept. Ten years later, Thomas says the group still cooks together in bulk.

"If you were to open my freezer, you'd see 50 meals in there," she says. "When we do a big cook now, we do 250 meals in one day and each go home with 60-plus meals."

The Big Cook mimics the dinner-assembly studios *Bistro* has written about this week, but at a fraction of the cost -- approximately \$10 for the main course for a meal for four to six, or \$2.50 per person. (Even the most reasonable of the dinner-assembly studios costs at least \$4 a serving.) Plus, taking part in a group cooking session is a way to share time with friends, cut down on fast-food costs and take the panic out of day-to-day cooking for a busy family.

In their cookbook, the authors organize making a group meal from start to finish, providing tips on grocery shopping beforehand, and cleaning up afterwards. They figure out the ingredient list to make one meal, four meals, six meals or eight meals of a specific menu item, and suggest labeling the zipper bags that the meals go into, to save later confusion. (Even different kinds of meals-in-a-bag all tend to look like something lumpy with carrots when frozen.)

The meals are family-friendly and feature a goodly number of canned, cream soups and dried onion soup mix. Some are fancier than others (Quebecois Chicken uses maple syrup and cider vinegar). Some can be stir-fried, but most are intended for the oven or slow cooker, which means your kitchen will smell good when you and your family walk in the door after a hard day at work or school. Thomas says it's surprising how little extra time it takes to make eight meals rather than one. "It takes 15 minutes to put together the ingredients for one meal, and 20 minutes for eight meals. You'll never make one meal again."

lfaulder@thejournal.canwest.com

© Copyright (c) The Edmonton Journal