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# Subscription Food Services: Worth The Investment?

*By Barbara Brody**This post originally appeared on [LearnVest](#).*

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.

“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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Then, of course, there’s the question of nutrition. Gans warns that some of the keywords used by these services—including “local,” “natural” and “real”—may lead consumers to mistakenly assume they’re diet-friendly. While some of the dishes meet her criteria for acceptable calorie, fat, fiber and sodium content, others fail.

“You really need to check the nutrition information,” Gans says. With some services, this is easier said than done, because not every site provides detailed nutrition facts. Gans’ advice? “If you wouldn’t order it in a restaurant, don’t make it at home,” she says. “Fried chicken is still fried chicken.”

That said, home-cooked meals do tend to be healthier than ordering a pizza or picking up Chinese after a long day at work. “We can’t guarantee every dish is perfect if you’re training for a marathon, but our meals are nutritious and better than what you’d probably get for delivery,” says HelloFresh’s Goldman. Newgent agrees, noting that these services provide perfectly portioned, well-balanced dinners. “And I’m a fan of using fresh, seasonal ingredients,” she adds.

Curious to give one (or more) a try? We break down how four of the most popular services stack up.

## Blue Apron

**How It Works** You sign up to receive ingredients and recipes for three meals per week for two, four or six people.

**Cost** \$9.99 per person, per meal (\$60 per week for the two-person plan).

**Pros** You can customize your protein preference, so vegetarians and pescatarians are easily accommodated. And you can opt out of shellfish, fish, red meat or pork. Plus, recipes include calorie counts.

“The variety of recipes and ingredients, quality of meats and produce, easy-to-follow directions and pre-portioned ingredients are all great,” says subscriber Marissa Kraft, 34, who works in advertising and lives in Brooklyn, N.Y.

**Cons** If you hate certain vegetables or have food allergies, you’re out of luck, since you can’t customize these elements.

**Sample Dishes** Coconut curry salmon steaks with celery bok choy over barley; pizza panini with red leaf salad.

**Best for ...** Budding chefs who are most picky about their protein sources.

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## HelloFresh

**How It Works** You choose the “classic” or “veggie” box and receive ingredients and recipes for

three meals per week for two or four people. Classic category subscribers get to review five meal options each week and select three.

**Cost** \$11.50 per person, per meal, for the classic box (\$69 per week for the two-person plan).

**Pros** Classic subscribers get some choice—you can switch your box from classic to veggie at any time or vice versa. The recipes are also versatile: They include calorie counts, require few steps and take 30 minutes or less to whip up.

“Everything that I have made, my husband and I have both enjoyed, and the produce is better than what I can get at my local grocery store,” says Erica Bond, 26, an insurance company territory manager based in Panama City, Fla.

**Cons** Having to picking three out of just five options might not be sufficient for choosy eaters, as well as those who have dietary restrictions. And veggie subscribers don’t get any choice at all.

**Sample Dishes** White bean and porcini mushroom ragu; curried pork skewers with caramelized onion rice.

**Best for ...** Gourmands who value speed and simplicity.

## Plated

**How It Works** No need to be a subscriber with this service—simply peruse the site whenever you’d like, review the current menu options and then add meals that look appealing and pay “per plate.” You can order each dish for two, four or six people, although there’s a four-plate-per-order minimum.

**Cost** \$15 per person, per meal. If you pay an optional monthly membership fee (\$10 per month, or \$8 per month if you commit to the whole year), the price drops to \$12 per person, per meal.

**Pros** You pick out each dish individually, so there are no surprises. And because nothing is on auto-ship, you’ll never end up with something you don’t like simply because you forgot to cancel a delivery.

“I really like how you can chose which meals you’re sent,” says Suzanne Lazear, 34, a grant writer in Los Angeles. “We have food allergies in the house, so this is vital in choosing a dinner subscription service.”

RELATED: [Kids & Food Allergies: 4 Ways to Keep High Costs in Check](#)

**Cons** Calorie counts, which are included with the recipes, can be high—some dishes clock in at around 900 calories—and prep time can be long, with some meals taking up to 50 minutes to complete. At \$15 per plate for nonsubscribers, this is also the most expensive subscription-service option.

**Sample Dishes** Lemon asparagus cavatelli; pork tenderloin with apricot and arugula salad.

**Best for ...** Finicky foodies and those with food allergies who crave lots of control.

## PeachDish

**How It Works** Sign up for two meals’ worth of ingredients and recipes each week that can feed either two or four people.

**Cost** \$12.50 per person, per meal, for the two-person plan (\$50 per week).

**Pros** The Atlanta-based company prides itself on providing creative, “Southern-infused” meals, which can be a boon if you’re tired of traditional fare. Recipes are easy to follow and take 30 to 40 minutes to prepare.

**Cons** No choice or flexibility; you either take the two set meals or cancel for the week, so vegetarians and other particular eaters may be unhappy. Also, calorie counts are not currently provided.

**Sample Dishes** Tilapia-and-kimchi tacos; flat iron steak with chimichurri, quinoa and cinnamon-caramelized bananas.

**Best for ...** Adventurous eaters who will try just about anything.

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