

## Dinner business offers meals in a snap



Glen Stubbe, Star Tribune

Chris Nowak, Snap Pea's executive chef, prepared beef stroganoff for the evening rush at Snap Pea in Lakeville. The company sells partially prepared meals out of a storefront and will soon start opening kiosks in office buildings, where commuters can pick up meals before heading home.

Two Twin Cities women have founded a company that lets corporate workers grab take-and-make dinners at the end of the day.

By [SARAH LEMAGIE](#), Star Tribune

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Michelle Gobrecht and Carie Mathison are not professional cooks or restaurateurs, but they think they've come up with best new idea in fast food.

The Twin Cities career moms met because they have sons the same age. A deal to split child care turned into a friendship, and, in the summer of 2004, talk over food prep for a party led to Snap Pea.



Michelle Gobrecht, Carie Mathison

**Glen Stubbe, Star Tribune**

Think of a cross between Papa Murphy's pizza and a personal chef service, the women say. That's the idea behind Snap Pea, a take-and-bake supper company with ambitious plans to deliver fresh, flavorful meals to busy office workers who can head home and have dinner on the table in 15 or 30 minutes.

The pair opened a storefront in Lakeville a year ago to test out their system for preparing and selling a rotating menu of partially cooked meals such as home-style meatloaf and Thai broccoli stir-fry. But the pickup sites that they plan to open starting this summer at corporate buildings throughout the metro area are what they hope will make Snap Pea "a national name," Mathison said.

"It's not quite having a vending machine in the hallway" that dispenses sandwiches, she said, "but it's that convenient."

Here's how it will work: Snap Pea plans to open 22 tiny kiosks at Twin Cities office buildings with 1,500 or more workers. The first, at Butler Square in the warehouse district of Minneapolis, opens in June. Customers will order and pay for meals online in the morning, and Snap Pea employees will deliver them to the kiosks at the end of the day.

**Selling convenience**

Snap Pea's model is unique, its founders say, but a growing number of businesses are playing variations on the theme of wholesome, low-hassle meals.

"A high percentage of people really have no idea what they're going to be making at 4 o'clock for that evening, so the idea is to provide meal solutions for consumers where it's most convenient for them," said Dennis Degeneffe, a research fellow at the University of Minnesota's Food Industry Center.

In addition to grocery services such as Simon Delivers and meal assembly kitchens like Let's Dish, there are more specialized outfits such as Seattle Sutton's Healthy Eating that offer delivery of low-calorie meals for people who are trying to lose weight or manage a medical condition such as diabetes.

Even grocery stores increasingly feature displays with all the ingredients of a meal, allowing shoppers to get dinner without trolling the aisles.

Gobrecht, 37, and Mathison, 48, each came up with the idea for Snap Pea independently.

Mathison, of Inver Grove Heights, works in environmental operations for a major Twin Cities company, while Gobrecht, of St. Paul Park, has started and sold three previous businesses, using proceeds from one project to fund the next.

Gobrecht was on vacation from her last venture, a transportation brokerage, at a dude ranch in South Dakota when a dinner companion wondered: "Why can't you get food as good as this as fast as you can order a Big Mac?"

Gobrecht went back to her cabin and started writing the business plan for Snap Pea.

One day, while buying food for a party, Mathison started describing the idea she had for a business, and Gobrecht started laughing. "She handed me this folder of all this research she had been doing on a similar concept," Mathison said.

Kiosks in offices

Most single entrees range from \$5.50 to \$7.60 and dinner for four runs about \$14 to \$24. The partners, each of whom invested \$300,000 in the business, hope each kiosk will bring in \$230,000 to \$300,000 a year in revenue by generating 40 to 50 meals a day.

Snap Pea is targeting other downtown Minneapolis office buildings as possible sites, as well as suburban locations such as Centennial Lakes in Edina and even Metro Transit stops.

The business already has some fans, including Denise McCormick, senior property manager at Butler Square. McCormick is not charging Snap Pea rent for the kiosk that will open on the building's ground floor, seeing it as an amenity for the tenants.

Bill Bishop, chairman of Willard Bishop LLC, a Chicago retail marketing and consulting firm that specializes in the food industry, thinks time-starved Minnesotans will take to the concept.

The convenience of picking meals up at the workplace, "particularly with the winters you enjoy in Minneapolis and Minnesota, at least for four months of the year, that's a pretty big advantage right there."

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