

Chef gets personal

By CRISSA SHOEMAKER

Bucks County Courier Times

Mary Manahan was often so busy that she forgot to make dinner. So there were a lot of dinners out, and a lot of pizza.

Not anymore.

The Manahan family now relies on Melissa Wieczorek to provide healthy, great-tasting meals that they can enjoy together.

"My husband is tired of coming home and not having any food to eat," Mary Manahan said. "I get so busy and caught up in what I do that I forget to make dinner. It was a great idea. I am so glad he did this."

Wieczorek (pronounced vee-EK-zor-ek), is the Manahan family's personal chef. Twice a month, she creates her culinary delights in the kitchen of the Manahans' Newtown Township home, then packages everything up so the busy family can have home-cooked meals.

"Her food is delicious," said Manahan, whose just loves the mini turkey Parmesan meatloaf. "She is a wonderful cook."

Manahan said she and her family are saving money because they're no longer eating out so often. Wieczorek makes sure everything is labeled and includes re-heating directions.

Up until December, Wieczorek was director of the executive MBA program at Temple University. She'd always been in business education in one way or another. But her dreams were in the kitchen.

"Cooking has really been my passion," said Wieczorek, 34. "I was always trying to think of a way to combine my passion with my business experience."

As a student at Temple, Wieczorek created an independent study course on entrepreneurship. But she didn't enter the cooking world right away because she felt it wasn't the right time in her life to do so.

As head of the MBA program, Wieczorek was in charge of marketing, budgets and everything else - pretty much like running a business, she said. As the personal chef market boomed - and with full support from her husband, Eric, and son Tristan, 9 - she started her own business, A la Maison, in January.

Wieczorek learned to cook from her mother, who made sure each meal was unique. After college, she traveled through Europe, picking up techniques from chefs in southern Italy and France.

Her favorite cuisine has a Mediterranean flare, using olive oil, tomatoes and garlic. She loves rosemary and other fresh herbs. Everything she makes has already gotten the seal of approval from her own family.

In addition to the Manahans, Wieczorek has three other regular clients, plus she does catering jobs. She makes customized menus based on interviews with the families. She does the shopping for her meals and cleans up after herself. She makes five meals at a time, with four servings each.

Wieczorek's fee varies, depending on the family's diet and how many meals they require. It may be a bit more expensive than cooking for yourself, she said, but it's far cheaper than dining out every night.

Wieczorek's dream is to have enough clients to open a commercial kitchen, where she could also prepare for catering jobs and have a storefront that would serve take-out for people tired of grocery store fried chicken and other fast food.

"Life has changed so much over the past 10 to 15 years," she said. "People don't have time to cook anymore. We have jobs that are very demanding. We have more dual-income households. People are spending lots of money on take-out, a lot of money on restaurants. My whole goal is to bring dinner back home. I want to bring people together again."

Crissa Shoemaker can be reached at 215-949-4192 or cshoemaker@phillyBurbs.com.

April 26, 2005 5:22 AM