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BUSINESS COURIER

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Take-home trends

Business Courier of Cincinnati - by [Lisa Blank Fasig](#) Staff Reporter

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With so many parties competing for our dinner dollars, the chains that specialize in preparing such fare are concocting ways to remain on the table.

Premade meal shops, once considered the answer for harried consumers trading down from expensive restaurant meals, now find themselves pressured from below. Supermarkets, as they expand their offerings of prepared meals, are winning a growing share of the roughly 51 percent of consumer food dollars spent outside the home.

As a result, the number of premade meal chains, which peaked in 2006, has declined. But some prepared food retailers, such as **A Forkable Feast** and **Dream Dinners**, are finding growth areas, whether through special diet needs or targeted online marketing. Dream Dinners, where consumers prepare meals on-site, will in July launch a diabetes menu. And A Forkable Feast, the

Oakley seller of prepared meals, sandwiches and desserts, has launched a gluten-free menu whose sales rose 10 percent in the first few months after the owners began advertising it online.

"We're competing with other restaurants and other fast foods," said Stuart Schloss, who co-owns A Forkable Feast with Randy Bloch. "It's almost impossible to distinguish ourselves, what we do."

While an increasing number of restaurants have begun advertising carryout, some, including **TGI Friday's** and **Macaroni Grille**, have introduced frozen entrees for the store. Supermarkets, meanwhile, are goosing up their own take-home offerings. Upscale grocers such as **Whole Foods** might offer the most expansive selections, but even at traditional chains the take-home options have expanded from rotisserie chicken and fried goods to sushi and crabcakes.

"It's not only a good business decision for supermarkets, it's also a strategic move to help them build shopper loyalty," said Jim Hertel, managing partner of **Willard Bishop**, a suburban Chicago food retail expert. "Food away from home, those dollars were historically 50 to 52 percent. So there's a lot of opportunities as this trading down occurs."

Since its July 2007 opening, A Forkable Feast has seen bursts of growth and leveling out. It struggled with how to reach its target market, which is not so targeted. Customers include single professionals, working parents and retirees.

With little luck from ads in community newspapers, Schloss and Bloch switched to advertising on Facebook and **Google**. They also chose to tackle specific dietary needs and began experimenting with gluten-free meals at the suggestion of Bloch's son, who had worked at a gluten-free restaurant.

The partnership is expanding its wheat-free offerings to bread and pastries, using alternates such as sorghum, brown rice and chickpea flour.

The added menu, along with online ads and a presence at wedding shows and other events, contributed to what Schloss projects will be a revenue increase of up to 15 percent at the close of his second year.

Dream Dinners, which operates five area locations through franchise agreements, also is seeing double-digit sales growth – up almost 14 percent on a same-store basis in the past six months, CEO Darin Leonard said. **The Snohomish**, Wash.-based chain in July will launch Dinner for Life, which will feature a series of more advanced menus. The first will focus on diabetic entrees.

"It is a huge, burgeoning space that we believe we will be first to market," he said.

Such advancements, as well as its requirement that customers prepare their meals, have ensured Dream Dinners success, he said. Since it was founded six years ago, it has expanded to more than 150 stores, with average receipt values of \$180. Meanwhile, Leonard estimates more than half of other prepared meal chains have disappeared.

The longer A Forkable Feast holds on, the better chance for market share. Competition from supermarkets has thinned the herd of prepared meal chains, said Darren Tristano, executive vice president at **Technomic**, a Chicago-based food industry researcher. But he thinks there is enough demand for the concept to exist for years. "Nicheing is a way to differentiate, not survive," he said.

As A Forkable Feast tweaks its recipes, its owners also consider options. There could be a market in delivery to high-income retirees, for example. Still, said Schloss, "Right now I'd really be happy if I can have one niche knocked down before I try others."

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