

Home Style, Delivered

Ivy Cotler serves up the healthy yummys BY SUZI STEFFEN

The new baby's wailing, there's a pile of laundry waiting and the kitchen? The kitchen is covered in dishes from the night you went into labor.

Or maybe your partner just had surgery, you have deadlines looming at work and you're too busy doing home health care to get to the grocery store.

Or hey, maybe it's soccer practice, piano lessons, neighborhood meetings, not a spare second to poke your head in the fridge and see what you can cook up.

Luckily, Ivy Cotler has you covered.

Once a week, she delivers fiber-rich, low-fat vegetarian dishes, based on seasonally available vegetables, in large recyclable containers to a large variety of customers. For a family of four, the cost of a meal is \$23, and for eight servings, the price is \$32, well within range of a meal out but quite a lot healthier than running to a restaurant.



"It's the kind of food you would cook if you had time to make it," she says of things like her fettuccine with basil pesto or almond eggplant enchiladas.

In the spring, summer and fall, some of the ingredients come from the garden; for those who want more vegetables than arrive with the casseroles or other easy-to-reheat, easy-to-freeze dinners, she provides "veggie baskets" of produce with more vegetables from her garden, containing "a little of this, a little of that," she says. Her culinary baskets — "for people who wish they had time for canning" — contain yet more garden goodness, like fig jam.

Customers find Cotler through word of mouth or through her new website (www.ivyscookin.com). Website design is one of several trades she makes using her food as an incentive. "It's a great for bartering!" she says, and though she's quick to add, "I'll never get rich," the business makes enough money to pay for her mortgage and a decent life. She has traded food for massage therapy, medical and dental care, landscaping and haircuts.

Cotler began with a few customers 15 years ago, but now she's up to 30-40 regular customers per week, not including those who call for one or two weeks after that new baby arrives. Customers receive a two-month menu and place their orders each week by Monday night, which then ramps up Cotler's work week. "I do my shopping and some of my prep cooking on Tuesdays," she says, once she knows just how many pans of enchiladas or casserole she'll be making, and then Wednesdays bring the heavy work. By the end of the afternoon, some of the customers come to the house to pick up their food, but Cotler also delivers — in the Eugene area — during the day on Thursday.

What if the regular customers don't want the eggplant enchiladas? "In every season but summer, I offer soup, stew or chili in addition to the regular menu," Cotler says, and when customers call ahead of time, she can also offer one more alternative ready-made, healthy reheatable option. And she loves the people she has met through her business; she calls them her DLCs or "Darling Little Customers," and she notes that she found her best friend through making food for her after the friend's son was born.

But Cotler didn't begin her life as a cook. After



earning a bachelor's degree in environmental science from Stockton State College in south Jersey, she moved to Oregon to work for various governmental agencies as a hydrologist. But when the spotted owl wars heated up, she wanted to move into something that was both less controversial and more rewarding. Cotler remembered college experiences cooking with her grandmother, who lived an hour away: "She was a fantastic cook, a marvelous person — a real jewel," Cotler says. "And I'm also self-taught," she adds.

The work allows Cotler time to do things she likes: spending time outside every day, whether that's working in her garden or spending time in her beloved mountains, skiing, hiking or mountain biking. And what does she do to relax? Why, she has friends over for huge party — but this time, it's a potluck. "Every fall, my father used to make cioppino, and at some point 10 or 20 years ago, I started having a semi-potluck cioppino party." With a rich base from her garden tomatoes and the rapidly maturing basil of fall, Cotler makes a sort of stone soup with each friend bringing a morsel of seafood for the pot. "I have a few friends who will bring guitar and fiddle, and it's a fine time," she says.

For those who simply want her good food each week, the holidays bring a special treat: "the best gingerbread you've ever had," she claims. One of her customers likes it so much that she orders 8-10 loaves and buys gingerbread gifts for her own clients.

Cotler loves her work. "My customers run the spectrum from young working professional couples to families where someone just got out of the hospital or just had a baby. It's nice to cook good food for people and get appreciation from them," she says. And will she ever stop? She laughs. "I guess I can downsize if I feel like I'm getting old and feeble!" Otherwise, Ivy just keeps on cookin'. ♦

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