



REBECCA FIELD JAGER

Yule dinner in a box

*Let chefs do
all the work*

It's 4 p.m. on Christmas Day. With dinner scheduled for five, it's time to put on the turkey. And the ham. And the potatoes. And the stuffing, vegetables and dessert.

Welcome to the new seasonal feast — Christmas in a box. Already prepared by professional chefs, all you have to do is heat it through.

The feast without fuss comes in a cardboard “suitcase” you pick up at the restaurant the day before.

The version prepared by Burlington's Pepperwood Restaurant is a roasted 5.5-kilogram turkey, a Virginia ham with orange-flavoured Jack Daniel's glaze, garlic mashed potatoes, savoury stuffing, gravy, fresh vegetables, and warm apple-and-cranberry bread pudding.

It feeds eight to 10 people for \$179 plus tax — roughly \$20 a head.

Why would anyone don an apron again?

Enjoying meals prepared by upscale restaurants in the comfort of home is a growing trend in Canada. These days, it is perfectly acceptable to host a dinner party without preparing dinner.

DINNER: A great way to say thanks

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"We call it drop off catering," said Stephen Bell, a partner in Pepperwood Restaurants.

"When people entertain, they don't want the hassle of cooking, but they may want to do a bit of the work themselves so they feel like they've contributed to the meal. With drop off catering, we provide the food but no chef or wait staff so you get to serve it."

For those who worry guests might think you didn't do enough, a box with no label is available.

"About 25 per cent of our customers ask for this. They want to make it look like they did everything themselves."

Offering a prepared Christmas dinner is the brainchild of Bell and his partner, Bill Leslie. They came up with the idea four years ago and sold about 40 boxes. The number has doubled every year since.

"We get customers who are having the family over but have small kitchens or people who would rather spend time with their guests instead of cooking all day. We also get a lot of repeat customers."

One of them is Juno nominated blues singer Harrison Kennedy, who lives in Hamilton

but doesn't mind making the trek to the Burlington restaurant to pick up the meal. A few years ago, he ordered the dinner as a gift for his mother. She died last year, so this year he ordered it for his future mother-in-law.

The man cooks the bird in only 17 per cent of Canadian households.

"It's just such a nice way to say 'Thank you, I appreciate everything you do all year long,'" said Kennedy. "Usually moms spend the whole day in the kitchen making turkey and everything. Don't they deserve to have Christmas, too?"

Apparently not. According to a recent Butterball/Ipsos Reid survey, the man cooks the bird in only 17 per cent of Canadian households.

But for women, would Christmas be Christmas without slaving away all day? Isn't that part of the tradition?

"My mom loved the Pepperwood dinner," laughed Kennedy. "Giving it to some-

one, relieving a person of all that work, is a great gift."

Food expert and author of *Pantry Raid* (Whitecap 2002, \$24.95), Dana McCauley said drop off catering has been big in the United States for the past few years.

"In Texas, a restaurant called Central Market offers a bunch of different holiday menus to chose from. Here, it's slowly but surely catching on."

What are the pros and cons?

"There are lots of benefits for the cook. No shopping during those busy days before the holiday and no cleanup afterwards.

"On the downside, you might feel like you're cheating. There are no great smells in the house all day and there may be less leftovers. And, if you have a family who is committed to a certain way of making certain dishes, they may be disappointed. I suggest it for more open-minded families."

In terms of quality, Kennedy happily vouched for the taste.

"I come from a family of chefs and so there's no way I would serve anything that wasn't up to snuff!"

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