

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Judging Diet Haute Cuisine Just for the Taste of It

By PETER KING

Those who packed on the pounds during the winter will take little solace from the summer solstice. For them, getting out of the swimsuit means going on a diet.

Popular diet programs say the recipe for losing weight is cutting back without cutting out. The programs offer portion-controlled meals that sound as if they could be on the menu of your favorite upscale restaurant. But how good is the food?

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Our mission was to find out if dinner entrees from four diet-food providers were appetizing, flavorful and filling. We sampled meals from weight-loss companies **Jenny Craig Inc.**, **eDiets.com Inc.** and **NutriSystem Inc.** And to see if diet-yourselfers also could find sustenance, we had meals from Lean Cuisine, the frozen-food brand owned by **Nestlé SA** and widely available at supermarkets.

Depending on the provider, the meals are available in three formats: frozen, shelf-stable or fresh-prepared. Shelf-stable needs no refrigeration and is popular because of its portability. Fresh-prepared must be refrigerated and should be consumed in a relatively short time after the food arrives.

We ate three dinner entrees from each provider, one a night on a rotating basis for 12 straight nights. All of our dinners were prepared in a microwave following directions on the products' boxes. Weight loss wasn't a primary goal, so we didn't join any diet program or follow any strict regimen as recommended by the companies. And because our tests were small samples of the companies' products, we aren't passing judgment on their entire lines. The

entrees we chose were the kind of meals we cook for ourselves or order in a restaurant.

As for nutrition, executives at Jenny Craig, NutriSystem and eDiets told us their weekly plans, which provide three meals a day plus a snack, supply a balanced diet and are formulated to leave consumers feeling full. All offer online or telephone support as part of their food plans. The Lean Cuisine Web site says its meals "combine great taste and good nutrition." With Lean Cuisine, you're on your own to make sure you get the right mix and amount of nutrients.

Jenny Craig offers frozen and shelf-stable meals. But before you can dine with Jenny, you must become a member, an expense that is in addition to the cost of the food. (Membership costs run from the "20 Pounds for \$20" special online promotion that is currently running to \$399 a year.) "Jenny's Cuisine" is available online or at the company's 650 U.S. centers. The company says customers who order online get their frozen meals packed with dry ice via overnight shippers. (We picked up our dinners at a local center.)

The meals were hit and miss. Fish and chips (potato wedges) (frozen, 5.4 oz.; 250 calories) was very tasty (the potato wedges were especially good), but the slice of battered pollock was a small fry, leaving us hungry. Meatloaf with barbecue sauce (frozen, 8.2 oz.; 300 calories) was filling, featuring a firm patty and sauce that added zest without drowning the meat. Sweet and sour chicken with rice (shelf-stable, 8 oz.; 200 calories) was goopy, and the sauce was neither sweet nor sour.

eDiets is an online weight-loss company that offers personalized diet information for a fee. If you sign up for its meal-deliv-



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ery service, you get the advice free. eDiets' food is all "fresh prepared," a process a company executive told us consists of flash-freezing the meals and then sending them out chilled. Our eDiets meals came via FedEx in a polystyrene-foam cooler packed with ice and each

had a "use by" date of two weeks after the shipment arrived.

As for the meals, they were mostly disappointing. Turkey breast with quinoa pilaf (9.8 oz.; 290 calories), rekindled memories of TV dinners in aluminum trays. The turkey was dry and

had an aftertaste; the pilaf had no taste at all. Beef steak with quinoa pilaf (8.5 oz.; 320 calories) had large slices of chewy meat, but again the ubiquitous pilaf was tasteless. Kung pao chicken with peanuts and brown rice (8 oz.; 380 calories) was tasty and filling, with a spicy sauce and flavorful rice.

NutriSystem is primarily a shelf-stable-based meal plan, though the company recently added a more expensive NutriSystem Select frozen-food line. The shelf-stable products are sent via conventional shippers like UPS. For the Select products, NutriSystem has teamed with Schwan's, an upscale food-delivery service.

Our two shelf-stable meals—chicken with dumplings (10 oz.; 240 calories) and sweet and sour chicken with noodles (10 oz.; 200 calories)—were gloopy concoctions of indistinguishable flavors, but despite the low calorie counts, we did feel filled up. Our NutriSystem Select meal of turkey medallions with broccoli, carrots and cauliflower (10 oz.; 220 calories) was delivered via refrigerated Schwan's truck and wrapped in an insulated freezer bag with gel ice-pack bags. This was the best meal in our 12-day diet-food odyssey; the turkey was moist and tasty, and the vegetables were flavorful and vibrant with color.

Lean Cuisine offers scores of

portion-controlled lunch and dinner meals with the convenience of buying them at the supermarket. A dieter could cobble together a weekly menu similar to the ones offered by Jenny Craig, NutriSystem and eDiets with the help of breakfast and snack products made by freezer-case rivals Weight Watchers Smart Ones and Healthy Choice. Two of our Lean Cuisine meals were very good. Chicken marsala with linguine (8.1 oz.; 250 calories) featured two tasty but thin silver-dollar-size breaded chicken patties in wine sauce. We were hungry for more after we finished. Parmesan-crusted fish (9 oz.; 290 calories) offered a decent-size piece of pollock, along with penne pasta that was firm and could have passed for homemade. The sesame chicken (9 oz.; 330 calories), with its four soggy nugget-like pieces, may be an ethnic dish—in McDonald's.

Of our 12 meals (six frozen, three fresh-prepared, three shelf-stable), the frozen entrees generally tasted better and were more appetizing. While none of the meals rose to the touted claims of being "restaurant quality," none was truly terrible either. So if your main worry about starting a diet plan is that you won't be able to stomach the food, you can eliminate at least that weight from your shoulders.

COMPANY/WEB SITE	AVAILABILITY	WEEKLY FOOD COSTS	COMMENT
Jenny Craig JennyCraig.com	Jenny Craig centers; online	\$84 to \$126	Must be a member to buy the food. Provides frozen and shelf-stable meals.
eDiets eDiets.com	online	\$140	Food is all "fresh prepared" and must be consumed within about two weeks after delivery.
NutriSystem NutriSystem.com	online	\$75 to \$82 (core); \$100 to \$107 (select)	Core program is shelf-stable products only. New Select service features frozen-food items.
Lean Cuisine LeanCuisine.com	supermarkets	about \$75 (varies according to products chosen)	Frozen-food line readily available at thousands of retailers. Offers primarily lunch and dinner items.

Note: Weekly food costs include three meals plus one snack or dessert a day; shipping is extra.