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## The Do's and Don'ts of Delivery Food

By Eric Asimov

“These people work all day, and they pay a baby sitter, and they’re not going to come home and then go out to dinner.”

- Marc Murphy, restaurateur, Landmarc

**Y**ou can see them in any kind of weather and at almost any time of day. On bicycles that look sturdy enough to withstand a collision with a tank, the seats often wrapped in old plastic bags, they surge ahead through snow and rain, heat and, yes, especially gloom of night. No marble carving will ever exalt their heroic efforts, yet they are fixtures of almost any residential neighborhood in New York City. They deliver dinner, and sometimes lunch and breakfast, too. Yet within the reinforced bags dangling from their handlebars, the prepared dishes in their plastic, microwave-proof containers convey far more than a meal. They speak of the evolving stew of cultures that simmers throughout the five boroughs. They speak of the typical New Yorker’s contradictory character: brash but overworked, stoic but requiring rewards, impatient but willing to wait. Most of all they embody what many New Yorkers regard as an inalienable right: to have meals of almost any conceivable sort delivered to their door, hot, fragrant and appetizing.

Each night tens of thousands of meals flow through the city’s arteries. Chinese and pizza, of course, but also Indian, Thai, Turkish, French, Mexican, sushi -- you name it, and it’s delivered. Even some higher-end restaurants are beginning to deliver. When Marc Murphy opened Landmarc in TriBeCa early last year, he did not offer delivery. But Mr. Murphy soon found that his customers yearned for it, especially those with children.

“I’m a fan of people coming to a restaurant and having a meal, but I’ve come to terms with that,” he said. “These people work all day, and they pay a baby sitter, and they’re not going to come home and then go out to dinner.”

Judging by the volume of menus crammed into kitchen drawers around the city, it may seem as if delivery food were as old a feature of New York as the Brooklyn Bridge. But it’s a relatively recent phenomenon, becoming a significant part of the restaurant business only in the last 20 years or so.

“Chinese Food Places Vying on Delivery” was the headline for an article in The New York Times in 1983, in which the writer, Fred Ferretti, noted the increase in small Chinese restaurants around town, many promising speedy home delivery for the first time. “Takeout menus are stuffed into apartment-house mailboxes, piled on lobby furniture, thrown in heaps on lobby floors or shoved under doors,” he reported. “The menus are elaborate, and they urge you to telephone for your instant banquet.”

Why then? Back in the 1960’s and early 70’s Chinese restaurants like Uncle Tai’s, David K’s and Shun Lee Palace were popular Midtown destinations. But the economic crisis of the late 70’s took its toll, and restaurateurs with fewer resources opened

uptown in less expensive residential neighborhoods. “That’s when delivery took off,” said Michael Tong, whose Shun Lee Palace is the sole Midtown survivor of that glossier era.

Mr. Tong was against takeout food at first, feeling that he could not match the quality of what he served in the restaurant. But eventually he gave in. Now, he said, he does 500 delivery meals a night alone from Shun Lee West, his restaurant near Lincoln Center. “I have 15 people, a team, just working on delivery,” he said.

New York’s infatuation with home delivery parallels takeout’s growth throughout the country in the last 25 years, yet receiving a superb southern Indian eggplant and ginger dish at your door conveys a different sense of citizenship than does driving to the nearest Boston Market to pick up a chicken.

New York’s population density, particularly in Manhattan, makes it especially conducive to delivery. Harry Balzer, vice president of the NPD Group, a consumer research company based in Port Washington, N.Y., said that in 2004 residents of the New York region were almost 30 percent more likely to eat a takeout meal than people elsewhere. About 49 percent of restaurant meals sold in the New York area were takeout, as opposed to 38 percent in other places.

New York City kitchens are often not inviting places to cook, but lack of space is not the only reason for the rise of carryout, and it does not account for the national increase. A more persuasive case can be made that the rise in takeout meals is a response to the numbers of women entering the work force since the 1960’s. According to the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, the percentage of women in the civilian labor force rose to 56.3 in 2002 from 40.8 in 1970, an increase of about 38 percent. That leaves far fewer people with the time and energy to prepare the evening meal.

The 49 percent carryout figure for restaurant meals in the New York region does not separate the city from its suburbs, nor does it differentiate delivery meals from carryout meals, in which consumers take prepared meals away from restaurants, delis, groceries and the like. In the suburbs, or in sprawling cities like, say, Phoenix or Albuquerque, people think nothing of driving a few miles to pick up dinner.

“I think it’s fair to say that New Yorkers use delivery more,” Mr. Balzer said.

Delivery was at first the province almost exclusively of Chinese and pizza places, but soon small neighborhood restaurants of almost every ethnicity got in on the act, recognizing the need to compete.

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Check out our guide to the best and worst delivery foods

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## Dishes Worth Staying Home For

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In 1981, when Vijay Gupta opened Mughlai, an Indian restaurant on Columbus Avenue and 75th Street, delivery was not a consideration. He began delivery about a decade ago, he said, and it has skyrocketed in the last three or four years.

"I think it has tripled," he said. "Now, 30 to 35 percent of my business is delivery."

Many restaurants, particularly those that opened without delivery in mind, have trouble nowadays keeping up with the demand. Delivery requires space for packing the meals, and people dedicated to the job. It means room for storing containers and the myriad condiments and cutlery that gets shoved into the bag.

"We could have much more business, but the kitchen is too small," said Gennaro Picone, who owns an Italian restaurant, Gennaro, on the Upper West Side. Mr. Picone has come to embrace delivery, but when he opened in 1997, he believed the service could give

people the wrong idea about his restaurant.

"Doing delivery was kind of like, you degrade your place," he said.

Perception is still an issue. Many restaurants do not want to take the chance that they will be judged on food that has sat in plastic containers for however long it takes to travel from kitchen to dining table. Others do not need the business. Those who live near Grocery, a small restaurant in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, ache for the day it begins delivery, but Charles Kiely and Sharon Pachter, the chefs and owners, say they have plenty of business already. So does Nice Matin on the Upper West Side.

Though most menu drawers are nonetheless still crammed to overflowing, those menus may one day go the way of the rotary phone. Web sites like www.menupages.com offer a tidier alternative, and new Web services are coming along with the hope of turning

ordering into an online operation. SeamlessWeb, which has developed a business for corporate clients that allows them to order meals online, is poised this month to begin a residential service at www.seamlessweb.com. The company says it will allow consumers to order online directly from more than 600 restaurants. The virtual menu may point to a future of virtual restaurants, those constructed for the sole purpose of offering delivery service, without a storefront.

Mr. Murphy, of Landmarc in TriBeCa, said his focus has to be on the customers who actually come to his restaurant, but that he is trying to improve his delivery service. He said he now has one employee dedicated to taking orders and making sure everything is packed correctly. He sends his own house-made vanilla caramels with each order. And now, Mr. Murphy said, he is in pursuit of delivery's holy grail, the one tool that nobody has been able to get right.

"We're trying to find the right containers for delivering ice cream."

## Sometimes Food Gets A Bumpy Ride

By Marian Burros

*NEW YORK'S restaurants and shops have developed techniques and containers for getting the food to the customer as fast and as hot as possible. But for all their expertise, none of these places has ever figured out a way to keep certain foods palatable if they have to travel more than two minutes.*



### A Good Bet

On the other hand there are dishes that were made for the highway.

**LASAGNA AND EGGPLANT PARMESAN** and similar Italian dishes are virtually impervious to destruction. Should they cool down, reheating does no damage.

**BARBECUE** travels well whether it is pulled pork or brisket or served with a South American or Middle Eastern accent. All are meant to be reheated if the delivery man gets stuck in traffic.

**SOUPS AND STEWS**, no matter their ethnicity, were designed to be prepared in advance and reheated.

**DIPS AND SPREADS** like guacamole, hummus and baba ghanouj -- any room temperature spread -- are equally good travelers.

**SALADS**, as long as the dressing is on the side, remain sprightly, whether or not they contain protein. But put the salad on a plate immediately if it is delivered in foil. The acid in the dressing, whether it's lemon or vinegar, and the foil play havoc with taste. The acidic dressing can also cause holes in the container.

### May Disappoint

**FRENCH FRIES**, along with all fried foods from tempura to chicken, top the list. They can't be refreshed in the microwave; they can be marginally improved in an oven, but there is always the risk of drying them out.

**HAMBURGERS**, especially ordered rare, lose half their juices on the trip, turning buns soggy. If you crave a hamburger, ask for it deconstructed.

**THE NEW YORK SLICE** was invented for a reason: thin-crust pizzas were not meant for a trip farther than the oven to the plate.

**THE CHEESE** in toasted cheese sandwiches, cheeseburgers or cheese dogs goes from runny to plastic en route. You can try a few seconds in the microwave to revive it.

**ROAST CHICKEN**, alas. While there are some places that deliver an excellent roast chicken, crispy skin goes flabby (an excellent disincentive for dieters), and white meat is beyond dry. That is why so many roast chicken orders are accompanied by something to slather over them. If you must, order dark meat; hold the skin.

Nigel Holmes