

# A chef to call your own

*Hiring a personal chef may not be the extravagance it seems*

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**H**OLIDAY STRESS. It begins with the ramp-up to Thanksgiving and doesn't dissipate until the old year passes. How to cope? Here's a thought: Get someone else to do the work.

Imagine throwing a dinner party where all you have to do is show up with flowers for the table. Imagine arriving home after negotiating work, shopping and some obligatory holiday function to find dinner's been made and it's not fast food.

Yes, but there's a shortage of geniuses in bottles.

Perhaps, but you could hire a personal chef.

Yes, but do I look like I'm made of money?

Hawaii's small community of personal chefs says local families haven't quite grasped a concept that's quite big in larger cities — that it is practical to have someone else do your cooking.

"Some people don't see the value," says Francesco Valentini.

Consider what you get, says Michael O'Connor. "I do the shop-

ping, I do all the cooking, I portion everything, give the heating directions. And of course I do all the cleaning. ...

"And I take my own garbage away, too."

Valentini and O'Connor represent the spectrum of services offered by the professional chef. O'Connor, through his business, Home-Chef, makes regular visits to homes, where he cooks up a raft of meals that the family can parcel out over a week or two. Valentini Personal Chef & Catering specializes in the intimate dinner party, offering classic Italian menus.

Both operate fairly new one-man businesses, formed over the last two years. They made the leap from more traditional chef positions for the same reason that most in the industry do — to work for themselves and to make that absolute connection with the people eating their food.

"This is the only way I could deliver the product I like to make ... the closest to real Italian flavor," says Valentini.

Oahu has many great Italian restaurants, he says, but even those

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**Chef Francesco Valentini tops a dessert of Monte Bianco with whipped cream. The dish made with fresh chestnuts is typical of the traditional Italian fare he prepares for private parties.**

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## Chefs offer Thanksgiving suggestions

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Personal chefs Michael O'Connor and Francesco Valentini offered these suggestions for dishes that would be appropriate to the holiday table.

O'Connor's Sandy Beans are reminiscent of that Thanksgiving staple, the Campbell's Green Bean Bake, but much lighter and more distinctive. It's a very simple dish that O'Connor says tastes more complex than it really is.

### Sandy Beans

- 8 ounces frozen french-cut green beans, thawed
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 13 cup seasoned breadcrumbs
- 2 tablespoons finely grated Parmesan cheese

Bring a pot of water to a boil and cook 4 to 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, melt butter in a non-stick pan. Add breadcrumbs and stir until combined. Mixture will resemble wet sand.

Drain beans and place in an oven-proof dish. Spread breadcrumbs evenly over the top. Sprinkle with cheese. Broil 3 minutes or until breadcrumbs are golden brown. Watch closely to prevent scorching.

Just before serving, stir breadcrumbs and cheese into beans. Serves 5.

Approximate nutritional analysis, per serving: 94 calories, 6 g total fat, 14 mg cholesterol, 297 mg sodium, 3 g protein, 9 g carbohydrate, 2g fiber.

VALENTINI says the Italian repertoire doesn't offer much in the way of dishes that would fit the American Thanksgiving table, but he did come up with this traditional fall dessert using chestnuts.

Monte Bianco (White Mountain) seems simple, but step one is to peel a pound of fresh chestnuts, which could take an hour.

Valentini is a purist, but use



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### Cocoa powder is the finishing touch to a Monte Bianco.

canned chestnuts or a prepared chestnut purée if you must.

### Monte Bianco

- 1 pound fresh chestnuts
- 1 pint milk
- 1 ounce sugar
- 1/2 vanilla bean (or 2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract)
- 2 tablespoons Amaretto liquor
- Whipped cream and cocoa powder, for garnish

Peel chestnuts. Place in a skillet and cover with lightly salted water. Bring to a boil and cook 10 minutes; drain. Peel off the thin skin covering the nut while still hot (after cooling they will be hard to peel).

Place chestnuts, milk, sugar and vanilla bean in a pot. Bring to a boil, then simmer 60 to 80 minutes, until the chestnuts are very tender and have absorbed much of the milk. Discard vanilla bean.

Mash chestnuts until smooth. Add Amaretto and mash again to incorporate. Refrigerate until chilled, 10 to 15 minutes.

Scoop mixture into a pastry bag fitted with a round tip. Squeeze mixture onto serving plates. It will come out like a noodle; form into piles, or "mountains" about 2 inches high. Top with whipped cream and dust with cocoa powder. Serves 4.

**Variation:** Make 1 large mountain and scoop out individual servings at the table.

Nutritional information unavailable.

## Chefs: The personalized service is a practical gift idea

Continued from D1

chefs must make compromises for timely service. A customer can't be kept waiting 40 minutes for risotto, for example, so some pre-cooking must be done.

Valentini's service turns on handmade pastas and breads, classic dishes such as osso bucco served the minute it is ready. "I want to teach people handmade, authentic cooking, like it used to be, years ago."

THE HOLIDAYS are a prime time to consider this service. A professional can take nearly all the fuss and bother out of a formal dinner party, or just make sure your family eats well and regularly through all the frazzle of the season. Most of these chefs also offer gift certificates, so you could give a busy family the gift of a few nights of meals in their own home.

At other times of year, a chef's expertise would be a priceless gift to a woman who's just had a baby, or to a family dealing with an illness.

"Friends of the family like to buy the service because they feel they can't do much else to help," says Tracey Jo Peralta of Hanai Chef. "It's a great way to ease the burden for the family."

And it's not only for the well-monied. The chefs say the cost needs to be weighed against savings — not just in cooking time, but in food costs, shopping, driving around and general stress.

O'CONNOR and Peralta both offer meal plans that top out at \$300 for five meals for four people, but their basic plans are below \$200. The average is \$15 to \$18 per meal.

"People who need it see that it definitely can fit into their lives," Peralta says. "I think of it as a substitute to going out to dinner really late or going to McDonald's with the kids. It's healthier."

Valentini's dinners start at \$500 for a five-course sit-down meal for eight, which includes a full day before the dinner, collecting fresh ingredients all over the island. That price breaks down to \$62.50 per person, an amount easily spent hosting an evening out at nice restaurant, Valentini says.

A personal chef — as op-

### Finding a chef of your own

There is no central listing for personal chefs in Hawaii, but here are a few of those available on Oahu:

**Mimi and Rick Chang, Flours and Flowers:** Small private parties (up to 125) and weddings. Rick Chang is pastry chef at the Halekulani and specializes in wedding cakes. Call 739-9289 or 227-2299, or e-mail foursandflowers@hotmail.com.

**Alyssa Moreau, Divine Creations:** Focusing on vegetarian meals. Moreau also teaches cooking to small groups. Call 595-5066.

**Tracey Jo Peralta, Hanai Chef:** Offers in-home cooking or will deliver prepared meals. Also caters small parties. Prices start at five entrees for 2 for \$180. Preview menus at www.hanaichef.com. Call 429-7764 or e-mail hanaichef@hawaii.rr.com.

**Sean Preister, The Wild Mushroom:** Caters small dinner parties. Prices start at \$45 for a three-course dinner, but vary depending on type of dishes and service required. Call 591-1700 or e-mail wildmushroom@att.net.

**Michael O'Connor, Home-Chef:** In-home cooking and catering for small parties. Prices start at \$150 for four entrees for two. Preview menus at www.home-chef.biz. Call 232-4231 or 738-5163, or e-mail chefmike@home-chef.biz.

**Francesco Valentini, Valentini Personal Chef & Catering:** Private parties featuring Italian specialties from his native Sienna. Prices start at \$500 for a five-course dinner for eight. Preview menus at chefvalentini.com. Call 224-9241 or e-mail francesco@chefvalentini.com.

For more information on selecting a personal chef, visit the Web sites for the American Personal Chef Association ([www.personalchef.com](http://www.personalchef.com)) and the U.S. Personal Chef Association ([www.uspca.com](http://www.uspca.com)).

posed to a traditional caterer who shows up with trays of food already prepared — works in your kitchen after devising a customized menu. Most do have set menu plans, but will adjust to individual tastes and dietary needs.

O'Connor says most of his clients are working couples who are simply too busy to make their own meals, but understand that eating out every night is a costly alternative.

Most gave up cooking long ago, he says. "When I do an interview with people, one of my questions is, 'Does your oven work?' and some of them will say, 'Oh, I don't know.' Of course, I need an oven."

Others need help meeting a family member's special dietary needs. O'Connor cooks daily in the home of Nalani Kele, whose husband, Jesse, is on a liquid diet. He makes two regular meals for her daily and two soups and a breakfast drink for her husband. The soups are liquefied completely.

Each meal comes with a nutritional breakdown, so Kele can control her husband's diet. "I know exactly what Jesse's getting every day."

Kele says she's been using O'Connor for 18 months, and has a similar arrangement in Las Vegas, where the couple spends another home.

"I tell everybody about him," she says. "What he's doing is critical from our standpoint."

WORD-OF-MOUTH advertising is the basis of this business. "If you don't hustle and keep doing, you lose touch," Peralta says.

There's no listing for "personal chef" in the yellow pages and the two primary national associations — American Professional Chefs and United States Professional Chefs — offer just a handful of names locally (and most of those listings are no longer current).

But those who are pioneering the field here say it's an idea that's bound to catch on, just as people have learned it can be cost-efficient to have someone else clean their homes, shampoo their carpets or wax their cars. This is even more basic.

"Every day you gotta eat," O'Connor says. "Every day people have to deal with that problem. You can only go to Zippy's so much."