



EDITOR'S PICK

LET'S GET TAKEOUT

Mad City Chefs meal kits make dinner prep a snap

By Victoria Davis, Special to the Cap Times Nov 29, 2020 Updated Nov 29, 2020



Ethan Kaercher, owner of Mad City Chefs, prepares meal kits for delivery at Badger Prairie Needs Network in Verona.

RUTHIE HAUGE



By

Chef Ethan Kaercher's earliest kitchen memory is making breakfast — and making a mess.

“Me and my twin brother were really young, just playing around and trying to make pancakes,” said Kaercher. “I remember flour just being pretty much everywhere.”

Through his private cooking and catering company Mad City Chefs, Kaercher now encourages Madisonians to get messy in their own kitchens with healthy, home-style meal kits.

The kits are similar to Blue Apron or Hello Fresh, containing fresh produce, meat and other pre-batched ingredients prepared the morning of delivery. Kaercher prepares a recipe card with step-by-step preparation instructions, offers ideas on how to get kids involved, and details nutritional information regarding the meal's ingredients.

The goal? To promote healthy eating, and teach families about healthy foods through time-friendly recipes.

[Madison baker takes the cake on 'Sugar Rush: Christmas']

“The idea behind it was to help those who weren't able to get home to make a fresh meal,” Kaercher said. “Or to make sure those who didn't have time to go to the grocery store would have these fresh ingredients ready, the recipe card ready, and a meal that would take 20 minutes to make.”



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“With so many of us sitting inside this winter, I think these kits are going to be a great tool to teach people how fun cooking can be, especially for the holidays,” he said.



New England style cod chowder was the menu item for a recent Mad City Chefs meal kit, assembled at Badger Prairie Needs Network in Verona. Owner of Mad City Chefs Ethan Kaercher packs the meal kits with as many reusable containers as possible to limit waste.

RUTHIE HAUGE

Prep time

Every Monday morning, Kaercher goes to the Badger Prairie Needs Network kitchen in Verona to put Mad City meal kits in cooler bags for same-day delivery. He vacuum seals meats to prevent leakage and stores liquids in glass bottles, using as many reusable containers as possible to limit waste.



Each week **he's prepping different meals**, with flavors inspired by cuisines from Southern barbecue and New England chowder to Thailand, Mexico and Japan. There are options for vegetarians and omnivores ("meatatarians" **on the website**), often variations on a similar dish or from the same cuisine: chicken parmigiana and eggplant parmigiana; pork meatballs and a vegetable mezza platter; sausage mushroom pizza or a cauliflower pizza.

Customers can place a one-time order for two servings (\$23) or four servings (\$40), or two orders (two weeks) of two to four servings (\$39-\$70).





Owner of Mad City Chefs Ethan Kaercher prepares meal kits on Mondays for delivery at Badger Prairie Needs Network in Verona.

RUTHIE HAUGE

The week before Thanksgiving, Mad City Chefs received its largest influx of meal kit orders yet. Kaercher's holiday meal kit (\$85-\$100) came complete with garlic herb turkey breasts, ciabatta stuffing with root vegetables and sausage, candied sweet potatoes, parmesan bacon Brussels sprouts and homemade dinner rolls.

Naturally, each box included cranberry sauce and gravy. A veggie/vegan option centered hasselback butternut squash. A pie add-on (apple, pumpkin or pecan) cost \$20.

[Take and bake coastal cuisine from Madtown Food Services]



“What people seem to really want is something simple, what they’re used to,” said Kaercher. “I like to take traditional recipes and elevate them, in essence, with ingredients that they might not be able to find in common grocery stores.

“I’m making these recipes my own, but still making these meals comfortable (for) customers.”

Kaercher’s zest for chopping, grilling and mixing came from his own family. His mom was “always baking something,” using either her own recipes or those passed down through familial generations. His father had a green thumb and believed in growing, harvesting and raising their own food. They family had a two-acre garden and a farmhouse with chickens and cows they’d process for beef.

The family’s conscientious diet became more of a necessity when Ethan’s mom began to lose mobility due to multiple sclerosis.

“She was diagnosed at age 26, when she had me and my brother,” Kaercher said. “When we were about 6 or 7, she was in a wheelchair. ... She took more of a holistic route of healing.

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Ingredients in a Mad City Chefs meal kit for tonkotsu pork shio ramen package include pork chops, baby spinach, scallions, garlic cloves, ponzu sauce, a soy-cured egg, shio tare (flavoring paste), sesame oil, shiitake mushrooms, a seaweed sheet, almond milk and red miso paste.

VICTORIA DAVIS

[Shake Shack, baby: Iconic NYC burger joint comes to Hilldale]



Cooking for company

Kaercher attended the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and earned a bachelor's degree in exercise science with an emphasis in nutrition. After earning an associate's degree in business in 2012 at Madison College as well, Kaercher started Mad City Chefs.

At first Kaercher cooked for in-home parties of eight to 10, which grew to 20 or 30. When he started getting requests for weddings of 100 or more people, he started the full-service catering branch of the business. Friends he'd met through years in the food business gave the company a boost.



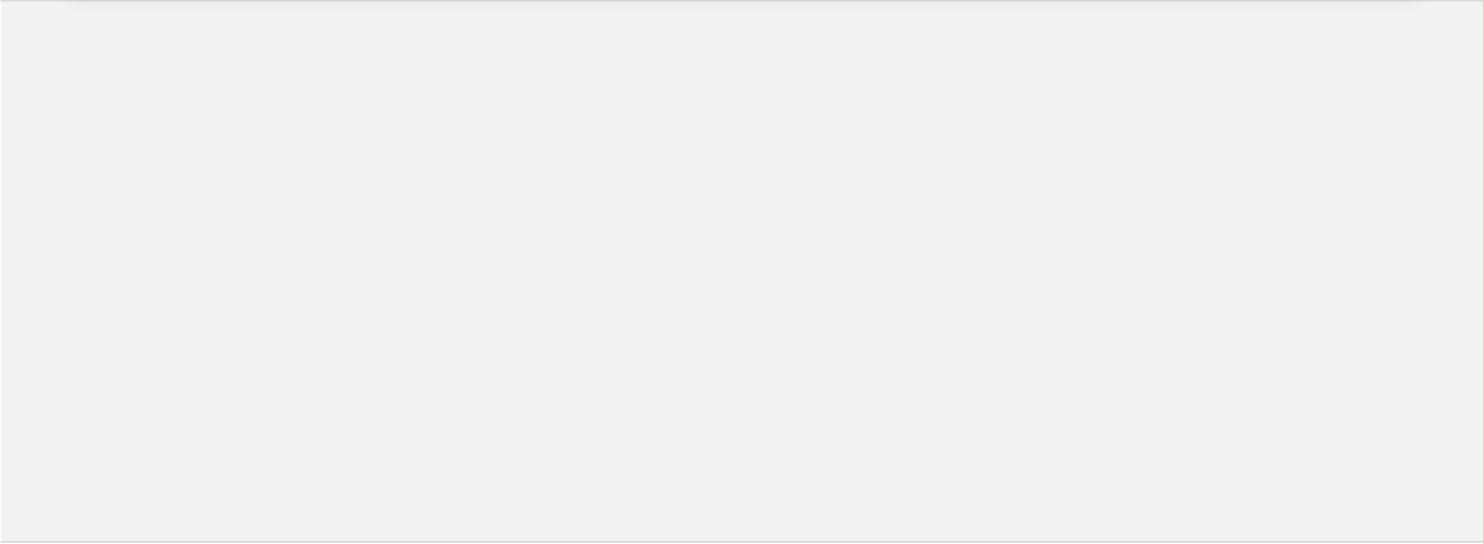
Tonkotsu pork shio ramen, prepared from a Mad City Chefs meal kit, is topped with mushrooms, a soy-cured egg, seaweed and more.

VICTORIA DAVIS

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In 2018, Arndt began developing local meal kits with dietitian Kara Hoerr. Kaercher was brought on as a consultant, making kits for patients and hospital residents. Mad City Chefs has now taken over the program.

Kaercher tries to source ingredients locally, working with farms like Peeper Hollow Farm in Barneveld and Renaissance Farms in Spring Green (known for herbs). Kits have included honey from Verona or Odyssey feta from Monroe.





Seared pork chops are among the elements in a Mad City Chefs meal kit for tonkotsu ramen prepared at home.

VICTORIA DAVIS

Family dinners

Mad City Chefs still offers private cooking and catering for smaller groups, but during the pandemic, the business is primarily focused on meal kits. This month, he's making gyro pork meatballs and pan-fried General Tao tofu, among other options.



Mad City Chefs also plans to offer meal kit specials for Christmas, with a similar price point to Thanksgiving kits. Recipe details are coming soon.

“I am enjoying creating this relationship with residents in Madison through food,” said Kaercher. “I’m still in touch with Dr. Brian, and every once in a while he’ll shoot me over a patient’s name who I get to make a custom meal for. I’ve gotten to know some of the customers on a very personal level and that has been really fun and special for sure.”

Customers can order meal kits from Mad City Chefs one week prior to the delivery day (Monday). Delivery locations include Madison, Fitchburg, Middleton, Monona, Oregon, Verona and Waunakee.

“There’s a lot of people spending more time with their family this year because of COVID,” Kaercher said. “They get excited when I drop these kits off because they actually get to cook with their families and learn with these ingredients.”

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Mad City Chefs

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Note: For UW Health employees, there are weekly deliveries to clinics in Verona and Belleville.

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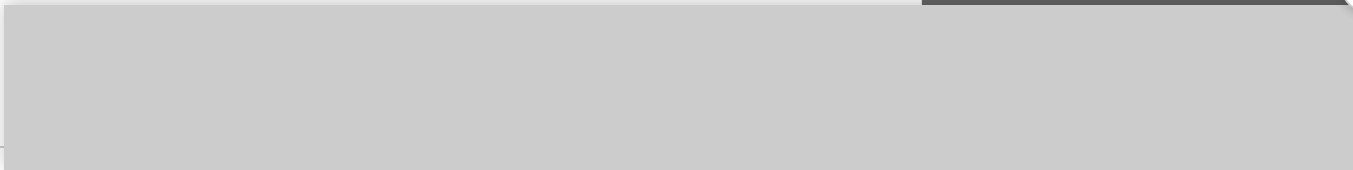
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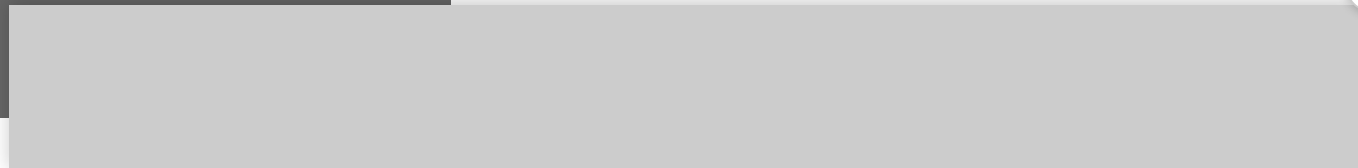
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