

BUSINESS

Meal kits won't start a cooking revolution—yet

By Alexandra Sifferlin



THE MEAL-KIT BUSINESS MAY BE heading for a food fight. On one side: retail giant (and Whole Foods acquirer) Amazon, which recently started selling boxes of premeasured ingredients and easy-to-follow cooking instructions to a select group of customers. On the other: smaller companies that were already doing this, including HelloFresh, Plated and Blue Apron, which went public on June 29.

But no matter which side emerges victorious, the meal-kit industry is still rife with issues.

Numerous studies show that when people cook their own meals with fresh ingredients, they're more likely to make healthier food, which can lower their risk of chronic diseases like diabetes and obesity. That's why services like Blue Apron have attracted so much attention: they promise nothing short of a cooking revolution, one that could touch every household in America. (Time Inc., which owns TIME, offers the FreshRealm meal-kit service through two of its other brands, *Real Simple* and *Cooking Light*.)

But several years in, results are mixed. While meal kits are estimated to be a \$2.2 billion global business, that figure is well under 1% of the \$1.3 trillion food market, and far

less than the \$14 billion market for preprepared foods. Meanwhile, only a third of all Americans cook every day—and less than half cook a few times per week, per a recent Harris poll. “In an ideal world, people would be taught the value of cooking at an early age,” says Mark Bittman, author of *How to Cook Everything*, who helped launch meal-kit startup Purple Carrot. But they're far likelier to see ads for junk food.

There's also the issue of cost. On average, meal kits, including Amazon's, set patrons back between \$8 and \$12 per serving. While that may be a bargain for urban dwellers with disposable income, it's burden for others: 56% of users who give up meal kits cite cost as their main reason, according to Darren Seifer, who analyzes the food and beverage industry for the market-research firm NPD Group.

Convenience is a sticking point,

as well. Even with preportioned ingredients, meal-kit meals can be labor intensive; some recipes require more than an hour. “It's a privilege of the wealthy to have time to cook,” says Nina Ichikawa, a policy director at the Berkeley Food Institute. “And it shouldn't be.”

That said, there is evidence to suggest the meal-kit movement is gaining momentum. The number of American homes that have tried meal kits is now 5%, up from 3% from last year. And now that Amazon has expressed interest, it could expand the market in general. At least, that's how Blue Apron CEO Matthew Salzberg spun it before news about Amazon meal kits sent his company's stock price plummeting. If Amazon can bring more “online dollars into the offline grocery world,” he said, “that is good for us, and good for other players in online grocery.” □

HEALTH

The latest word on fake sugar

Artificial sweeteners don't appear to help people lose weight as promised, but instead may actually cause weight gain and other health-related problems, according to a large new study published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. Scientists don't know definitively why this might happen, but there are a few working theories. —A.S.



People who consume the most artificial sweeteners may also eat more processed food overall, which is linked to a higher risk for obesity or heart-related problems.



Sweeteners may interfere with a person's microbiome, a collection of gut bacteria crucial for the absorption of nutrients.



Regularly eating or drinking sugar substitutes may cause people to crave sweeter foods more often, thanks to how the brain's “sweetness receptors” respond to artificial sugars.

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