

DINNER

Dilemmas Solved?

Two moms try The Six O'Clock Scramble in search of a solution.

By Erin Mantz

When I first called Nina Frye of Sparta, N.J., she had just returned from the grocery store and sounded rather frazzled from shopping. She had run into a friend while roaming the aisles, and they'd commiserated across their carts, ending with "tacos again." Like many of us—myself included—Nina successfully runs her own business and raises kids on a jam-packed schedule, but daily decisions about what to make for dinner is what really drives her crazy. "I am juggling it all," Nina says. "With three kids ages 9, 11 and 13, it's hard to find a meal that is nutritious and tasty. As for planning, I don't do it, and if a recipe gets complicated, you lose me. I get overwhelmed and go back to making the same old stuff." She works from home, but between meeting the school bus and shuttling the kids to activities, the day seems to slip away and dinner is rarely a done deal. As a part-time fitness instructor and health-conscious mom, Nina longed to work low-fat dishes and vegetables into family meals. More than anything, she didn't want to feel frantic at every dinner hour.

Neither did Beth Smith, *Hybrid Mom's* Editor-in-Chief. So we decided to do an experiment. What if one service could solve their dinner dilemmas? Enter The Six O'Clock Scramble, an online dinner planning service and web site that offers subscribers healthy,

fast, family-friendly recipes; grocery shopping lists that automatically update based on your selections; a searchable recipe database and more. Subscribers can even customize their weekly plan based on their families' likes or dislikes, or work around vegetarians, food allergies, even picky eaters.

In early May, Beth and Nina signed up for The Scramble to see if it could solve their dinner dilemmas for the week ahead. This is their story.

Nina: From "Dinner Slacker Mom" to "Scramble Success Story"

"Your taste buds need to grow!" Nina announced to her family, pointing to 11-year-old Andrew, her particularly picky eater. She explained they would start The Scramble on Sunday and each family member could go on the site and select a recipe. She would have dinner planned, ingredients in and everything set for dinner for five nights. For one week at least, there would be no ordering pizza or baked ziti for the 100th time.

Going to the grocery store can be a dreaded experience. Even after a trip, sometimes you can't make a recipe because you forgot an ingredient. On The Scramble web site, Nina found helpful tips like, "Here's what you probably already have in your kitchen." And she was able to print out a detailed

list, organized by store section, to make it through the market quickly. "The greatest feeling was going to the grocery store and knowing exactly what was for dinner in the five nights ahead," she recalls.

Even better, she found the recipes easy to make. "I'm not the best cook—I need simplicity," Nina told me. "These recipes were fresh and simple. I whipped out Linguine with Basil and Clams in 20 minutes, loved the Honey-Baked Chicken and made Nachos on Cinco de Mayo." An added bonus was how the kids tried things they normally wouldn't, like artichokes and black beans.

Overall, The Scramble was a hit in her house. When the five-night experiment ended, her son even asked if he could "go back in there" to pick more recipes. "The meals were easy to make and tasted great—sometimes you don't get both," Nina says of The Scramble. The easiest part was getting such well-organized grocery lists and making the recipes. She's now set a goal to continue The Scramble at least three nights a week—but not consequentially. She'll fit it into her family's schedule, which includes occasionally eating out or having dinner at a friend's house.

Beth: Gearing Up for The Scramble (But Wait Is This Starting Today?)

After a typically hectic day that starts at 5 a.m., Beth often scrambles to get dinner on the table. Her days are filled with working before sunrise, getting 7-year-old Jenna off to school, trying to squeeze in an hour at the gym only to return home to work until after-school activities require her attention. Deciding what to do about dinner was a huge distraction on her already-packed to-do list. But she was ready to try.

Before Beth began The Scramble, she said time and organization would be her two biggest challenges. "If I could get on a consistent schedule for meal planning and food shopping it would be a great first step," she said. "If I don't food shop on a Monday, I give up on the whole week and try to make do with what I have in the house—which usually means breakfast for dinner with either eggs or pancakes on the menu!"

Sitting at her computer selecting recipes, she faced several fears. Would the dinners really be simple

to prepare? On a daily basis, she needs to get in and out of the kitchen fast. She had always dreaded grocery shopping—what would be different this time? How would she get her 7-year-old daughter to eat the vegetables? And what if The Scramble dishes were so good that her family realized how deprived they were before and wanted her to cook every night? But step one seemed promising—picking the recipes. "The site was extremely easy to navigate and I could add the ones I liked to my recipe box," Beth explained.

The food shopping step loomed ahead, but she found a solution: a grocery delivery service. "The day I was supposed to start The Scramble I was crazy busy and could not find the time to get to the supermarket—my same old problem. Knowing that the next day would probably be a repeat, I knew I had to find a solution." Beth shopped online and was thrilled as the bags and heavy 24 packs of water and Gatorade entered her house (in the rain). It was the best thing she did all year to save time. In fact, she calculated 2 hours a week x 52 weeks means she could get 104 hours back a year!

With the food there, she didn't mind cooking—it was a nice break from her laptop and a chance to catch up on the news. The first night she made Spanish Rice with Ground Turkey. She'd never cooked with ground turkey before and really liked the dish, but her daughter ate tiny forkfuls of turkey for fear of eating a green pepper or tomato. "Why do you have to be the one to do the scramble?" she groaned. This just solidified Beth's belief that she needed to get her daughter to branch out.

Day two was much better with, believe it or not, the light and lemony baked fish. Even her daughter reluctantly gave it a thumbs up, despite the lack of bread crumb coating Beth previously cooked with to disguise the taste of the fish. She cooked the Baked Chicken Romano next and, with a home-cooked meal three nights in a row, her husband couldn't believe his good fortune. "It's not realistic to think I will cook more than three nights a week, but I feel good about that given our schedules. Besides, I really do make great pancakes."



How One Mompreneur Turned a Good Idea Into a Sizzling Success

When starting a business, people often say you should do what you love. For Aviva Goldfarb, it was sharing recipes. In 2003, she was home with her kids, then 6 and 4, and although she wanted to cook more to save money, she couldn't find a cookbook to fit her family lifestyle. As a mom, she needed to know how long each recipe would take. So she started developing recipes with a friend and together they self-published a little cookbook. She was about to write a second one but decided to take the idea in a different direction. "I realized the hardest part of cooking dinner was the 'thinking about it' part, which really lent itself to e-mail and the web," she recalls. Fueled by the flavor of one amazing vegetarian meatloaf, she assembled recipes and launched a subscription-based online menu planning service fittingly called "The Six O'Clock Scramble."

Today, 3,000 subscribers, many of them time-starved moms, log on to The Scramble. The standards Aviva set in 2003 apply even more so in today's fast-paced, high-tech, fast-food world, where study after study shows the rise in childhood obesity, the importance of sitting down to family meals and the trend toward fresher foods and less preservatives. "My recipes help people stress less about meal planning,

eat healthier, save money and maximize time," she explains. Each week, subscribers receive an e-mail with recipes and instructions for balanced dinners and easy side-dishes. People can customize their weekly plan to fit their family's preferences by searching the large Scramble recipe database," Aviva explains. Grocery lists are automatically updated with a subscriber's choices and even organized by store sections. Meals include whole grains, lean proteins and lots of fruit and vegetables—and they're easy to follow, using just enough ingredients and short prep time.

Aviva adds about eight new recipes a month and gets her ideas from friends, friends of friends, subscribers and her own experiments. Official "Taste Testers" from across the country review every potential recipe. Nancy Bolen of Raleigh, N.C., puts each recipe through a tough test, rating everything from ease of directions and ingredients to time and taste. Her kids weigh in as well testing things like "Butterfly Pasta with White Beans and Basil" and "Sautéed Mini Chicken Burgers with Herbs."

The Scramble's success speaks to moms' constant quest for time and balance, but it also speaks to Aviva's business sense. Over the years, she has responded to subscriber feedback and modified the service as needed. In the fall of 2007, she added menu customization, so people could select all vegetarian



Beth & Nina's Tips for a Successful Scramble

- Pick recipes on a regular schedule, like a Sunday night, and start scrambling on a Monday for a fresh start to the week.
- Just try it—you'll see a little planning goes a long way.
- Keep the pace of three or four healthy dinners a week and that nagging guilty feeling about what you've been feeding your family before might go away.
- Engage every family member in the process—whether it's picking a recipe or cooking one.
- Celebrate your success Friday nights with dinner out!

menus, work around food allergies, do five meals instead of seven and make other choices. Earlier this year, she added Scramble “Flavor Boosters” to recipes, giving people an option to spice things up. She’s building a buzz on the fast-growing mommy blog circuit, and still believes the best PR is word of mouth. Most of her new subscribers hear about The Scramble from other subscribers. Oh, and she finally wrote that second cookbook in 2006. *The Six O’Clock Scramble*, published by St.Martin’s Press, is now in its fifth printing. Evidently, dinner dilemmas transcend all mediums, paper and online, because you can never

have too many sources to avoid a six o’clock scramble.

As a well-established parenting writer in the Washington, D.C. area and the mom of two adventurous young boys, Erin weaves many real life experiences and daily humor into her writing. She serves as Editor-at-Large for Washington Parent Magazine and frequently appears on NBC News 4 in Washington, D.C. Her articles have also appeared in Tango Magazine, DailyCandy DC, Bethesda Magazine and Washington Woman.

The Six O’Clock Scramble’s Thai Garlic and Basil Chicken

Prep + Cook = 20 minutes 6 servings, about 1¼ cups each

If you want to spice things up, add a teaspoon of diced chili pepper, red pepper flakes, or a little chili garlic paste when sautéing the chicken. Serve it with white or brown rice and steamed broccoli. Your kids will ask for seconds.

2 Tbsp. canola or vegetable oil	1 pkg. (about 1½ lbs.) boneless, skinless
2 Tbsp. minced garlic (about 12 cloves)	chicken breasts, cut into 1-inch chunks
1 large red onion, quartered top-to-bottom and cut into strips	5-7 Tbsp. low-sodium soy sauce (to taste)
1 red bell pepper, cut into thin strips, about 1-inch long	1 Tbsp. white or brown sugar
	1½-2 cups fresh basil leaves, roughly chopped

If you are making rice, start that first. In a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat, heat the oil. Add the garlic, onion, and peppers and sauté them for 2 minutes. Add the chicken and stir-fry it until it starts to brown on all sides, but is not cooked through, about 3-5 minutes. (Meanwhile, steam the broccoli if you are making it.)

Add the soy sauce and sugar and cook the chicken, uncovered, tossing it occasionally, until the chicken is just cooked through, about 2-3 more minutes. (At this point you can cool and freeze the chicken for a future meal, then add the basil just before serving it.)

Add the basil, toss it well, and remove the chicken and vegetables from the heat. Cover it until ready to serve.

Nutritional Information per serving (% based upon daily values): Calories 210, Total Fat 6g, 9%, Saturated Fat 1g, 5%, Cholesterol 65mg, 22%, Sodium 580mg, 24%, Total Carbohydrate 9g, 3%, Dietary Fiber 2g, 8%, Sugar 4g, Protein 28g

Nutritional Information per serving (with ¾ cup steamed rice and 1 cup broccoli) (% based upon daily values): Calories 390, Total Fat 7g, 11%, Saturated Fat 1g, 5%, Cholesterol 65mg, 22%, Sodium 610mg, 25%, Total Carbohydrate 48g, 16%, Dietary Fiber 5g, 20%, Sugar 6g, Protein 34g

