



PHOTOS: LIM YAOHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Esymeals, of which Ms Grace Ng (above) is co-founder of, offers an islandwide chilled meal delivery service under the YeYeah Delights brand.

Meals on wheels take the **healthy** route



JOYCE TEO

More caterers are offering dishes with less salt, sugar and oil to meet the growing demand for healthier meals

Banker Rosalin Ong, 40, exercises regularly and used to consume a mostly healthy diet in which she would have just salad for dinner.

"I did it for years and my weight went down," she said. "But I got sick and tired of it."

So, when she chanced upon YeYeah Delights' weight-loss meal plan while surfing online in March, she ordered it immediately.

Each delivered meal, which costs \$12, comes with meat, carbohydrates and vegetables. There is also a soup and a snack of either yogurt or fruit.

It saves her the trouble of making dinner just for herself, she said, adding that she is the only one at

home who controls her calorie intake.

But Ms Ong did not take to the meals immediately and thought that it tasted "like hospital food".

"It was a bit bland, but I got used to it after three or four days and felt good after the fifth day."

She described the meals as being "very natural" and not salty, without any monosodium glutamate (MSG).

The good thing about the meals, she said, was that she felt full.

"When I ate salad, I felt hungry at night and tended to snack," she said. "The only hassle is that the food has to be heated up."

Esymeals, which offers an islandwide chilled meal delivery service under the YeYeah Delights brand, started the weight-loss menu late last year.

So far, about 30 customers have signed up.

The menu was put together by co-founder Jaclyn Reutens, who is a clinical dietitian. Each meal does not exceed 400 calories.

"We positioned them as calorie-controlled meals," said Ms Grace Ng, who co-founded Esymeals, a subsidiary of her family's business, KCK Food Catering, early last year.

This will make it easier for those who are counting their calories to manage their diet for health or to lose weight, she said.

There is also Healthy Catering Singapore, which started in May 2012. It offers healthier buffet menus which have less oil, sugar and salt.

Although caterers say most customers will still choose taste over a healthier option, many have begun offering healthier choices on their menus because of the growing demand for it.

Agreeing, Mr Daniel Ang, president of the Association of Catering Professionals, said: "Most caterers

today would be using less salt, less sugar and less oil."

MANY LIKE DEEP-FRIED FOOD

"Health is something that is so precious to everybody. So, if you ask people if they want a healthy menu, the answer is naturally yes," said Mr Ang, who is also the chief executive of catering companies Elsie's Kitchen and Continental Delight.

Still, that is as far as most caterers will go in the health stakes, he said, with most customers still preferring unhealthy but tasty deep-fried food.

Said Mr Ang: "Steamed items don't appeal to youngsters."

With most preferences leaning that way, caterers are reluctant to accede to the minority.

"A lot of customers ask if they can have a menu which has no deep-fried items at all," said Mr Kelvin Ong of Mom's Cooking, which offers only family meal deliveries.

"But it's difficult as we are serving different customers with different requirements. Our menu has to suit different people."



YeYeah Delights' weight-loss menu includes meals such as brown rice with braised lean pork, vegetables and watercress chicken soup (above) and wholemeal pasta with fish in low-fat mushroom sauce, vegetables and minestrone soup (right).



Heat fried items to get rid of oil

If you are getting your family meals delivered, but want to make them healthier, here is what you can do, said Ms Jenny Ng, principal dietitian at food consultancy Mind Your Diet:

- Avoid consuming the gravy.
- Heat fried items in the oven or toaster to "force" out the oil, then place them on a paper towel to soak up the oil.
- If the gravy is too oily or salty, dilute it with hot water.

If you are unsure whether your family meal is as healthy as the

caterer claims, just chill the food, she said.

"If the food has a layer of solid fat on top (especially a vegetable dish), then it's pretty obvious that the caterer uses cooking oil that is high in saturated fat, like palm oil or hydrogenated vegetable oil," she said.

Claims such as "use only vegetable oil" which are made by the caterers can simply mean that they do not use lard or animal fat.

"But they could be using a vegetable-based cooking oil that is high in saturated fat," she warned.

When I ate salad, I felt hungry at night and tended to snack. The only hassle is that the food has to be heated up.

Banker Rosalin Ong, on being more satiated after ordering YeYeah Delights' weight-loss meal plan

As people become more educated and more well-read, and as there is more publicity on healthy living by health agencies, it will become a trend.

Mr Daniel Ang, president of the Association of Catering Professionals, on the potential for the healthy meals sector to grow

According to Mr Ong, who has been in the catering business for 12 years, fewer than 30 of the 370-plus caterers here offer tingkat dinners, or hot tiffin-meal deliveries for families.

And most of them do it as a side business to their main buffet-catering business.

Mr Ang, who estimated that there are about 10,000 households here who order tingkat dinners, said the tingkat-delivery service is not an easy business to be in.

Caterers often have to handle a lot of last-minute changes or various requests, and collection of payment can be a problem at times, he said.

Also, quality ingredients cost more, said Mr Ong, who charges double the market rate.

Mr Ong, who used to run a mass-market tingkat delivery business, said the difference lies in the use of premium ingredients.

"We used to include canned food and processed food, such as luncheon meat, in our dishes, to keep prices low."

At Mom's Cooking, better-quality food, such as good-sized prawns, salmon and canola oil, which are more expensive, are used.

Meanwhile, Mr Ang's Continental Delight offers two healthier-choice menus, which cost about 10 per cent more than the normal menus because of the ingredients.

"For example, for the curry, we use yogurt or skimmed milk, instead of coconut milk," he said.

Ms Ng of YeYeah

Delights said most people who order tingkat deliveries are still value-conscious.

"Our weight-loss meal averages \$10 a meal. Traditional tingkat meals can cost as little as \$3.50 per person," she explained.

Currently, the customers willing to

pay more for healthier ingredients – such as basmati rice, salmon and olive oil – in the weight-loss meals are mostly local female executives, she said.

Another group demanding healthier meals are people in their 50s and older, who usually have medical conditions or are more educated.

"The more educated you are, the more likely you are better informed and, therefore, you tend to be more conscious of your health," said Mr Ang.

NEXT: POST-SURGERY MEALS

This niche sector, however, is set to change.

The Health Promotion Board (HPB) is currently reviewing its Healthier Catering programme, which it launched in 2012.

Details will be out in the next few months, but the programme will be scaled up and more caterers will be on its list of those offering healthier menu choices.

This list now has 34 caterers, including Indian restaurants.

Business owners say the market for healthy catered food, while still in its infancy, has growth potential.

"Our business has grown over the years, so I believe there is demand for healthier, quality food," said Mr Ong.

"We have had quite a lot of requests for brown rice. At this juncture, we don't offer it, but maybe later," he said, adding that the demand must be sustainable and large enough for that to happen.

Esymeals is also planning to start a YeYeah Delights post-surgery meal plan later this year, revealed Ms Ng.

"It will be a general post-surgery meal – a light diet, with soft food like porridge, as well as calcium-rich and high-fibre food," she said.

Mr Ang predicts that more caterers will serve up healthier meals.

"As people become more educated and more well-read, and as there is more publicity on healthy living by health agencies, it will become a trend," he said.

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THE NUMBER OF CATERERS NOW ON THE HEALTH PROMOTION BOARD'S HEALTHIER CATERING PROGRAMME, OFFERING HEALTHY MENU CHOICES

More braised and steamed dishes for a nutritious menu

For caterers, a healthier menu may consist of no more than one deep-fried item, said Mr Daniel Ang, president of the Association of Catering Professionals.

Most of the items will be steamed, braised, baked or stir-fried instead.

Also, the coconut milk in curries would be substituted with low-fat milk, he said.

Less sugar, salt and oil will be used, although the exact amount cannot always be ascertained, as most chefs estimate the amounts they put in, he said.

And even if buffet caterers do not offer a healthier menu, consumers can request less sugar, salt and oil to be added, said Mr Ang.

The managing director of caterer Food Fest F&B, Mr David Tan, said the company would, at times, customise a healthy menu according to customer requirements.

But if customers are looking for something truly healthy, they would have to look to companies such as Eymeals, which consulted a dietitian in the planning of its meals.

Ms Jaclyn Reutens, a clinical dietitian at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants and co-founder of Eymeals, worked on YeYeah Delights' weight-loss meals.

She said the salt content of each meal is less than 600mg – less than one third of the daily recommended allowance of 2,000mg.

Carbohydrates make up about 50 to 60 per cent of a meal with whole grains included. Proteins take up 20 to 30 per cent, while fat constitutes 10 to 20 per cent, with saturated fat comprising less than 10 per cent. These are the suggested amounts by the Health Promotion Board, said Ms Reutens.

Fresh ingredients are used so as to impart the natural taste of foods, she added. "We make our sauces and soups from scratch to limit the use of preservatives and added salt."

The weight-loss menu, which may consist of plain wholemeal pasta with boiled beef meatballs in a low-salt homemade marinara sauce and blanched vegetables, is also suitable for diabetics and people with hypertension, she said.

Under the HPB's Healthier

Catering Programme, there are guidelines for healthier menus, such as including dishes prepared with more fruit, vegetables, herbs and spices; and less oil, salt and sugar.

Dishes should also be prepared using healthier cooking methods, such as steaming, braising, boiling and stir-frying.

In addition, caterers have to limit deep-fried food to one out of five dishes; keep high-fat desserts, such as chendol and pastries, to one out of five dishes; choose low-fat milk instead of full-cream milk and include more vegetables. There should also be fresh fruit for dessert.

"There is a misconception that something nutritious and healthy cannot be tasty and enjoyable," said Mr Tan.

"Artery-clogging alfredo or cheese sauces aren't the only tasty sauces. Lighter sauces do the trick, too."

"A reduced-sodium soya sauce can transform a stir-fry, while a yogurt, cucumber or mint sauce can moisten a skinless chicken breast."

However, if you are hoping healthy food will be as tasty as, say, a hawker dish of char kway teow, you



ST FILE PHOTO
Foods which contain fibre, such as whole grain (above), can reduce the risk of stroke.

will be disappointed.

Singapore Heart Foundation's dietitian and nutritionist, Ms Lauren Ho, said people "have to be mentally prepared and be willing to embrace lighter flavours".

This means eating dishes which are less salty, oily and sweet, as well as those with more fibre, such as whole grains.

While some people would not even try to eat healthy, there is a bright side. Said Ms Ho: "Generally, I find that once people understand the benefits of such diets and the importance of making these changes, they are more willing to accept healthier foods."

Joyce Teo