

# A Fresh Idea

By Michael Hunter

STAFF WRITER

Atlanta, like many metropolitan areas, has seen a surge of interest in organic food, home gardening and fresh produce in the last few years.

Farmers' markets have proliferated in many intown neighborhoods as Atlantans seek to eat more healthfully.

"Awareness has grown immensely in the last five years," said Penny Fry, co-owner and operations manager of **Fresh 'n Fit Cuisine**, a Cumming-based freshly prepared meal delivery service. Not only is there increased awareness of America's "obesity epidemic," she said. "People are realizing that eating healthy is more important than losing weight."

Fresh 'n Fit Cuisine prepares meals from fresh ingredients in its 8,000-square-foot Cumming kitchen that are then delivered to pickup locations twice weekly. There are two plans available: a 1,200 calorie menu and a 2,000 calorie menu. Both menus adhere to the dietary guidelines set by the American Heart Association and American Diabetes Association and are low sodium with no artificial colors, added preservatives or trans fats.

The menus are planned around a six-week cycle, with new items introduced for variety each time. The company currently employs a chef, Brent McIntire, and three dietitians who create the menus.

The company began in 2004 when Fry's husband, Chris Gyoury, and his business partner, Sarah Burmeister, a successful TV production team of such food shows as "Good Eats" with Alton Brown and "Mario Eats Italy" with Mario Batali, decided to get into the food service business.

They were "looking for a unique food franchise," said Fry and were concerned about "unhealthy American eating habits." The partnership purchased the Georgia franchise of an Illinois-based healthy eating company and set up shop. Fry joined the company as co-owner and operations manager in 2005.

The partnership decided the food provided by their franchising company was too simple and bland for the Atlanta market and decided to strike out on their own. They reached an agreement with the Illinois company and in July of 2006, launched Fresh 'n Fit Cuisine.

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JOANN VITELLI

**Healthy living:** Fresh 'n Fit Cuisine co-owner and Operations Manager Penny Fry, left, at distribution site Discount Nutrition in Ansley Mall with distributor Anna Bridgett.

behind-the-scenes rebranding and extensive menu revisions. "A year after we made the change, we had doubled the number of customers," Fry said.

The company relies on distributors who purchase the meals wholesale from the company and sell them retail at various partner locations, often a health-related business like a fitness center or nutrition store. The company has grown from six distributors to 12 and from 19 partner locations to more than 50.

One of the benefits for distributors is the low entry cost into the business,

Convenience, taste expand food service's business beyond calorie counters

## Fresh 'n Fit Cuisine

**Founded:** July 2006

**Owners:** Penny Fry and Sarah Burmeister

**Employees:** 8 in the front office, 23 in the kitchen

**Growth:** From 19 distribution locations to 50 from Peachtree City to Blue Ridge, as well as out-of-state clients in the Southeast

**Growth strategy:** Grow brand awareness among medical, wellness and nutritional experts; expand corporate partnerships as well as out-of-state distribution

utors and supplies new recruits with a manual to guide them and assure brand consistency. "We interview them and make sure they have the sales and customer service skills needed and are committed," Fry said.

Barbara Bell took over an existing distributorship in Cobb County five years ago and has grown her business from one to nine locations. She has 300 "active customers" and during a typical week takes orders from 150 customers.

Because there is no contractual commitment, customers can order on a week-to-week basis. "Customers come and go," Bell said. While many people are attracted to the plan for medical reasons, "about half just want to eat better and love the convenience of a healthy, prepared meal," she said.

When it comes to scouting locations, Bell looks for "a good fit and a convenient location," she said. Most locations are health-related, but she is also in a coffee shop that caters to freelance workers who use it as office space.

Fitness trainers appreciate having the plan available in their facility as "a way to provide another service to their clients," she said.

She meets with the trainers one-on-one and leaves behind brochures she purchases from Fresh 'n Fit.

Bell categorizes her job as a "full-time, part-time job" that is "more personal than I thought." She is in constant contact with her clients, sending out a

weekly e-mail newsletter with tips and referring clients to Fresh 'n Fit dietitians for questions she can't answer.

Bell said the company's partnership with WellStar Health Place, a

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typically \$10,000 to \$15,000 for the basic office equipment and a stainless-steel cooler. Because food is prepared to order, there is no excess inventory.

The company currently has a waiting list of people interested in being distrib-

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hospital-based wellness center located at WellStar Kennestone Hospital in Marietta “has given us a lot of credibility.”

Allan Bishop, executive director of WellStar Health Place, was instrumental in Fresh 'n Fit Cuisine being offered at the wellness center. The center currently serves 6,000 members, as well as 11,000 employees of the WellStar Health System.

“We actually had our own staff inspect the headquarters and our dietitian checked it out,” he said. The center currently averages “around 50” meal pickups a week, he said.

New distributor Carol Cole also sought out a partnership with a health facility, Riverstone Medical Campus, for her new distributorship in Blue Ridge. Cole was a customer of Fresh 'n Fit who wanted to distribute in a new area. “We knew there was a need in the mountains,” she said.

Started in May 2010, the Blue Ridge office has 10 to 20 regular customers.

Since October of 2009, Fresh 'n Fit has opened 12 new distributor locations in Acworth, Johns Creek, Suwannee and Dunwoody, as well as Blue Ridge. Another area of expansion for the company is shipping the meals to out-of-state customers. In 2009, the company partnered with United Parcel Service Inc. and can ship meals overnight throughout the Southeast for an additional \$30 a week.

Fresh 'n' Fit now prepares up to 15,000 meals a week to order.

The BP oil spill and rising fuel costs for the company's three refrigerated trucks have led to slight price increases as well (from \$19 a day for the 1,200 calorie plan to \$21 currently), but Fry feels the company has remained true to its goal of providing fresh, affordable healthy cuisine.

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