



Personal chef Marsha Gale shops for groceries and brings them to her clients' homes. She then cooks meals and places them in the fridge or freezer.



# *What's for Dinner?*

Personal chefs serve up  
new twist on home cooking

By Mary Gilbert    Photos by Ray Sepesy

**M**arsha Gale stands over a cooktop, the savory aroma of sautéed onions, ground turkey and Southwestern spices scenting the air. “Healthy Mexican Casserole” is one of nine recipes she’s preparing this morning, but she’s not working in her Ballantyne kitchen, and none of the dishes is destined for her own family’s dinner table.

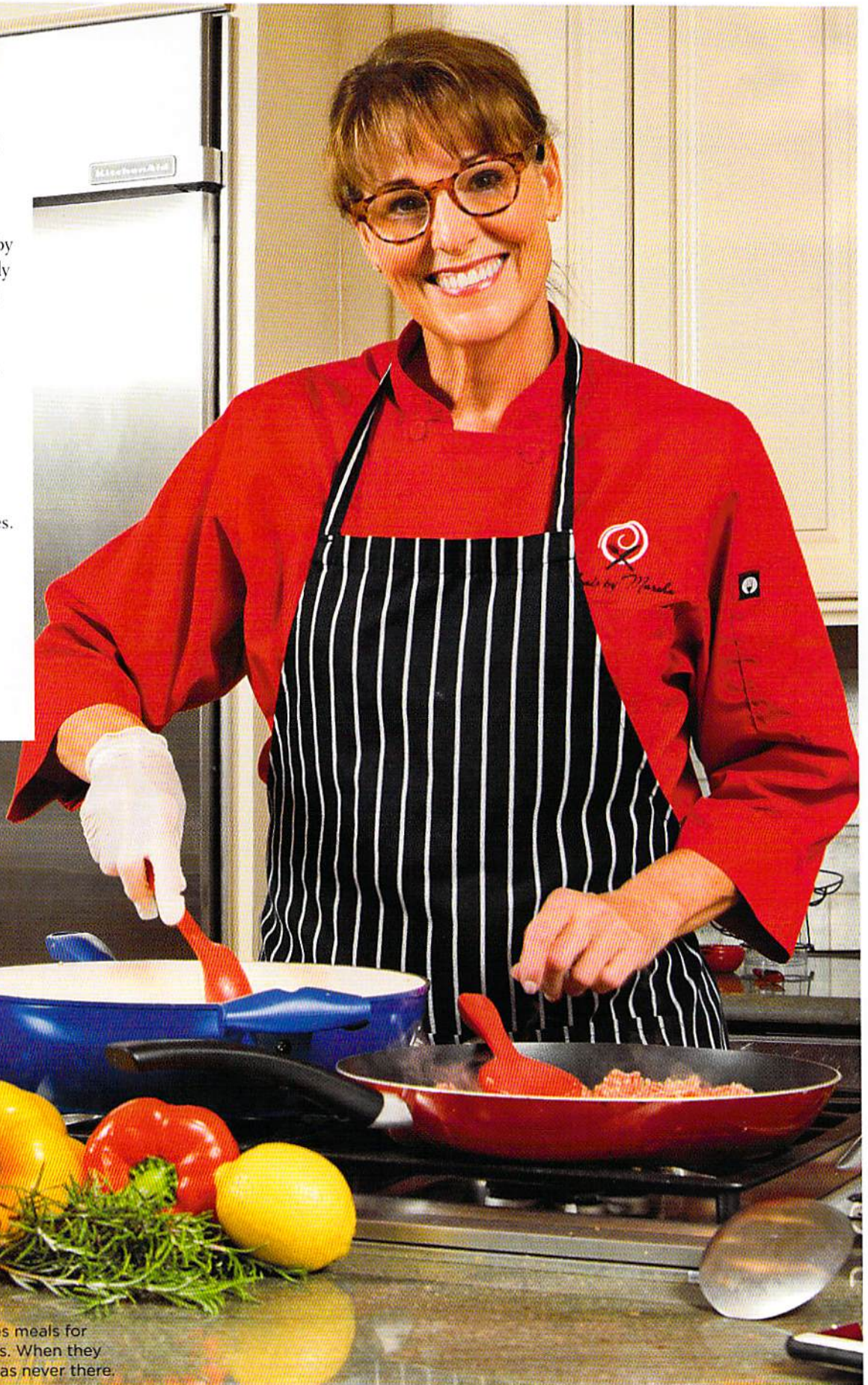
Gale, a self-taught cook and owner of Meals by Marsha, is a personal chef.

She’s making home-cooked meals in the south Charlotte residence of client Heather Cellini. Cellini and her husband are at work and their two sons are at school. Gale has even toted in a

few of her own specialty pots, culinary gadgets and spices to supplement the contents of the family's kitchen. Unlike private chefs, who are employed by a single individual or family and often live in, personal chefs typically produce several days' worth of tailored dishes in advance for multiple clients.

In this case, Gale had emailed a proposed menu the week before for Cellini to review and revise with any preferences. An avid traveler, Gale often adds new recipes to her repertoire from cooking classes she takes on the road.

Gale's to-do list is full: shop for the best and



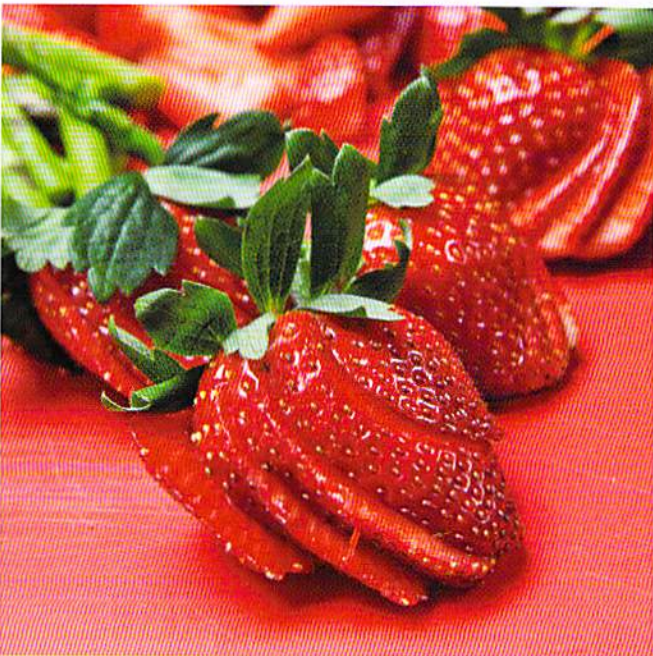
Marsha Gale prepares meals for clients in their homes. When they return, it's like she was never there.



**6,000**  
personal chefs in the U.S.

Nearly **65%**  
are women

More than  
**72,000 clients**



freshest ingredients; prepare multiple, good-for-you, customized meals; cool and package them individually with reheating instructions; and clean up. The only signs the Cellinis will know she was in their home will be

any lingering, tantalizing smells and completed meals in the fridge or freezer for them to enjoy.

### Growing Trend

As schedules become more demanding with

careers, kids, community activities, carpools and commutes, Ballantyne residents are increasingly turning to personal chefs like Gale to ensure that nutritious, ready-made, affordable meals

**Top Left:** Marsha Gale's breakfast burrito contains eggs, beans, Tater Tots, meat and tomatoes.

**Top Right:** Shonali Thomas adds asparagus as a twist to her popular deviled eggs.

**Bottom Left, Right:** Jill Aker-Ray slices fresh strawberries to go in her spring asparagus and strawberry salad (see recipe, p. 62).



await them at the end of their busy days.

It's an approach similar to outsourcing professionals to clean their houses or landscape their yards. Their reasons: to reclaim precious hours, meet dietary preferences and health needs, reduce household food spending, minimize perishable waste or add variety to mealtimes.

Recent statistics from the United States Personal Chef Association support this growing lifestyle trend:

- Some 6,000 personal chefs in the U.S. (nearly 65 percent of whom are women) serve more than 72,000 clients.
- Within the next five years, the numbers are expected to rise to 25,000 personal chefs serving nearly 300,000 clients.

Working in her commercial kitchen, Shonali Thomas prepares one of her specialties, deviled eggs.



Entrepreneur Magazine named the personal chef industry one of the **12 fastest-growing businesses in the country.**





"If people really looked at their **budgets to see how much money they spend** at grocery stores and restaurants, they might as well hire a personal chef."

— Ballantyne resident Conni Branscom



**Top Left, Top Right and Bottom Right:** Marsha Gale sautées beans, turkey and peppers for her Mexican casserole.

**Bottom Left:** Jill Aker-Ray serves her blood orange salmon with black rice, dried cherries and pepitas.

- Entrepreneur Magazine named the personal chef industry one of the 12 fastest-growing businesses in the country. Gale, too, can attest to an uptick in interest in the profession. She regularly fields phone and email

inquiries from prospective clients. When she's in grocery stores wearing her distinctive red chef's shirt bearing her company logo, fellow shoppers approach her with questions.

Cellini received Gale's personal chef services as

a Christmas gift from her husband. Heather Cellini cooks but "hates it," she says laughing. Initially, she thought a personal chef was an extravagance. Now, she considers it a need.

"Marsha makes things I hadn't attempted because I

assumed my kids wouldn't like them, but her food is healthy, tastes good and it's not mom making them eat it," Cellini says. "Knowing Marsha has our dinner ready gives me more quality time with my kids, and you can't put a price on that."

### Building Relationships

Unlike Gale, who works in her clients' kitchens, Shonali Thomas, chef/owner of SplenDishes Kitchen, operates primarily from a commercial kitchen in Van Wyck, South Carolina. The space is equipped with a six-burner gas stovetop, regular and convection ovens and hefty refrigerators.

Thomas honed her trade from chef friends who own restaurants and catering companies. In addition,

the multitasking Thomas caters, holds culinary parties, teaches cooking classes and crafts small-batch gourmet sauces, spices and condiments that she markets online and in select stores. A cookbook author, she makes regular guest appearances on Fox 46's "Good Day Charlotte" and WBTV's "Morning Break" and "Morning News."

Thomas' style of food is healthy indulgence. She invites clients to cherry-pick from the diverse dishes she posts regularly on her Instagram account (@shonalskitchen). She then delivers the choices in containers ready to reheat. Some clients who like to cook just have Thomas handle prep, so for them she slices and dices vegetables and cuts and seasons meat.

Thomas' client Conni Branscom, a mother of four in Ballantyne, values the convenience and the relationship she's developed with Thomas.

"Her meals are more balanced than me stopping at the store and picking up whatever every night," Branscom says. "She knows my family and what they like, and it's meaningful because she personalizes everything."

### Have Chef, Will Travel

Ballantyne resident Libby McColgin's bond with personal chef Jill Aker-Ray is so tight that she relies on Aker-Ray to manage daily meals at the McColgin family's rental house during their annual beach reunions at Isle of

Having dinner already prepared gives parents more quality time with their children.

Palms, South Carolina. With family and friends in attendance, the group can be as large as 16 people.

"I love to cook, and I don't take it lightly handing it over to someone else, but Jill is passionate about helping us and I trust her implicitly," McColgin says. "She graciously accommodates those with gluten and dairy allergies, and she knows the right balance of when to interact with our group and when to step back."



## Personalized Care in the Ballantyne Area.



Committed to making an impact in our patients dental health, Holt Family Dentistry delivers exceptional high-tech dentistry in a relaxed, family-friendly atmosphere. Our diverse and dedicated staff collaborates as a team to surpass expectations, putting patients at ease and earning their trust. We look forward to having you become part of our dental family.

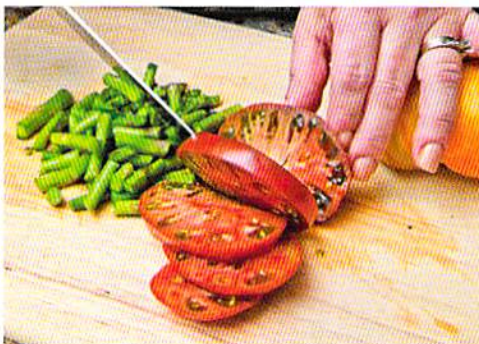
12105 Copper Way Suite 200, Charlotte, NC 28277

[holtfamilydentistry.com](http://holtfamilydentistry.com)

704.542.2325



Aker-Ray, who grew up cooking, lives in south Charlotte. She loves to answer the question "What's for dinner?" without the constraints of adhering to a particular cuisine, and she values creating food-related memories. Overall, her cuisine is classic comfort food with a fresh, flavorful twist. She credits her exposure as a guest chef on morning TV shows like WCNC's "Charlotte Today" and WBTV's "Morning Break" and "News at Noon" for boosting her vacation chef business. Known for her flexibility,



If you want to impress someone with a beautiful meal and take credit for it, **Aker-Ray will come incognito** and prepare it.







## Chimichurri Sauce

Courtesy of Marsha Gale

- 1 cup fresh flat-leaf parsley, chopped
- ¾ cup fresh cilantro, chopped
- ¼ cup fresh basil, chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ cup red wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes (add more to taste)
- juice of 1 lime
- ½ cup olive oil salt and pepper
- 1 skirt steak

Coarsely chop flat-leaf parsley, cilantro, basil and garlic cloves.

Put mixture in a food processor. Add red wine vinegar, juice of 1 lime, red pepper flakes and salt and pepper. Process to combine.

Slowly add olive oil and process until smooth.

Put chimichurri in a bowl and place in the refrigerator for at least 20 minutes.

Top skirt steak or any grilled meat with the chimichurri sauce.

Makes approximately ¾ cup of sauce.



## Spring Asparagus and Strawberry Salad

Courtesy of Jill Aker-Ray

*Gently combine the following:*

- 1 pound asparagus, cut into 2-inch pieces, tough ends removed (blanched and shocked, optional)
- 1 pint fresh strawberries, rinsed, stemmed and quartered
- Baby greens (shown with arugula), optional

*Add toppings and dressing:*

- ½ teaspoon toasted sesame seeds
- ¼ cup crumbled blue cheese
- 3 tablespoons poppy seed dressing (see below)

Serves 4-6.

## Homemade Mason Jar Poppy Seed Dressing

- 1 cup canola oil
- 1/2 cup lemon juice
- 1/4 cup white wine vinegar
- 1/2 cup honey
- 1 tablespoon poppy seeds
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1/2 teaspoon salt

Place all dressing ingredients into a Mason jar. Place lid on jar and tighten. Shake vigorously. Store in refrigerator for up to a week. When ready to use, set out at room temperature for 30 minutes, then whisk or shake to combine again.



## Crash Hot Potatoes

Courtesy of Shonali Thomas

- 8 baby red potatoes
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- Splendishes Bourbon Bacon Salt
- 4 cloves garlic, smashed into a paste
- 2 tablespoons fresh herbs, finely chopped (rosemary, thyme and oregano work well)
- ¼ cup grated parmesan cheese

Preheat oven to 425 degrees.

Cook potatoes in microwave until fork tender (approximately 3-5 minutes).

Combine olive oil, herbs and garlic in a small bowl.

Place potatoes on well-greased baking sheet. Using a potato masher, gently smash down potatoes in a crisscross direction (so each one resembles a peanut butter cookie).

Brush smashed potatoes generously with olive oil mixture.

Bake for 12 minutes, then top with parmesan cheese. Bake an additional 10 minutes, until tops and edges are crispy.

Serves 4.

Aker-Ray rises to unexpected challenges on the job; she once killed, cleaned and cooked 40 lobsters in Anguilla.

She also provides meals for families spending "staycations" in their own homes. For a client on the blood-type diet, she spent time researching the science to develop acceptable options.

"I love being an invisible chef," Aker-Ray notes. "If you want to impress your mother-in-law or boss with a beautiful meal and take credit for it, I'll come incognito to prep, cook and stage it. I sneak out the back before your guest arrives at the front door."

Branscom says with the many conveniences and benefits of hiring a personal chef that it can be worth the investment.

"If people really looked at their budgets to see how much money they spend at grocery stores and restaurants, they might as well hire a personal chef. It's worth it, knowing you're getting the best ingredients and personalized meals, and it frees up your time." ☺



## More Info

Service fees for these personal chefs vary according to their client needs, and the cost of groceries is additional. For more information on services and pricing, check out:

**chefjillakerray.com**  
(Jill Aker-Ray)

**mealsbymarsha.com**  
(Marsha Gale)

**splendishes.com**  
(Shonali Thomas)