

Where do you shop for Mother's Day treats? I have a clear memory of wandering through drugstore aisles as a kid, clutching my dollar bill tight in my sweaty hand, trying to decide what type of toilet water or dusting powder my mother and grandmother might like.

These days, Mother's Day shoppers may look in a computer software shop or an adventure travel catalog, as well as the more traditional jewelry counter and clothing store. But one question remains constant: Once we kick mom out of the kitchen, what will we serve for dinner?

This week, we did a pre-holiday exploration of three markets that specialize in takeout food. The idea was to put together an elaborate picnic or family dinner that would ensure a full meal with little or no fuss.

If you don't need these ideas this week, tuck them away for future reference. Every meal planner deserves a night off from time to time.

Bliss Market

675 Wolcott Hill Road
Wethersfield
529-4419



What an apt name! A visit to Bliss Market certainly put me into a blissful state. Fire-roasted peppers; blue cheese and red potato salad; perfectly succulent lamb shish kebab; tart, light-as-a-feather key lime mousse. These are not what I expected to find at an IGA supermarket.

But this is obviously no ordinary market. Two years ago, when owner Nick DeFrino decided to turn his son John loose in the kitchen, the area's benchmark for takeout food was raised about three notches.

Although he claims to have had no formal cooking training, John has turned the glass cases at the center of the store into an island of culinary delight. He and pastry chef Nancy Schemp fill these cases with at least 18 entrees, 10 to 15 salads and 25 exquisite desserts every day. Each comes to the consumer packed in clear plastic boxes that are sturdy, stackable and easily identified in the refrigerator. And these boxes stand up well during reheating.

The most expensive of these entrees are huge barbecued shrimp, gilded with a sweet-and-soy, teriyaki-style glaze and cooked over such an intense flame that the juices are seared and sealed inside. At the other end of the cost spectrum are the bow-tie noodles with pesto, a conglomeration with a vaguely mustardy kick that featured chopped red pepper, broccoli and celery.

Although prepared earlier in the day, the lamb kebabs were perfectly juicy, and the vegetables had picked up none of the slight-



■ John DeFrino, chef at Bliss Market in Wethersfield, tends to one of his takeout dishes, a cucumber and red onion salad with basil vinaigrette dressing.

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ly stale, oxidized flavor that sometimes results when produce and cooked meat are stored together. Hunks of freshly grilled tuna played happily with white beans in a variation on the salad nicoise theme.

Appropriately enough, there are often three or four kinds of Bliss potato salads available. After we sampled the version with goat cheese and roasted red and yellow peppers, and the one with smoked ham in a mustard dressing, we settled upon a terrific version coated with a strong blue cheese and scallion dressing. Of the three roasted vegetable mixtures offered, we went for the "roots," including carrots, sweet potatoes, winter squash and parsnips — which was a most pleasant way to get your vitamins.

If making a choice among the savories was difficult, it was nearly impossible when it came to desserts. How could we sidestep an orange-chocolate cheesecake or quadruple mocha torte? How do you choose between a lemon macaroon tart and a mixed berry cheese pie?

Each of the four pastries we sampled was well prepared and imaginative. We were particularly interested in the individual items, which we thought would travel well to a picnic.

The apple-almond tart was a terrific combo of crumbly tart crust, almond-paste filling and glazed apple slices that hung over the edges and made the whole thing look rather like an asterisk.

An extremely light cylinder of key lime mousse sits atop a narrow floor of spongecake, the perfect dessert after a heavy meal. The chocolate tarts look dazzling, chocolate-flavored tart shells filled with a vanilla cream and topped with a layer of dark chocolate glaze drizzled with white chocolate stripes.

Even the least exciting of the desserts, a lemon-coconut tart that lacked sufficient citrus bite, could have proudly taken its place on almost any restaurant pastry cart in Greater Hartford.

The store, by the way, is not named for the state of mind of the customers, but for the street in Hartford where John's grandfather, Nicholas DeFrino, started the market. Soon, the lower end of the state can enjoy this Bliss, as John looks to establish a branch in Old Lyme.