

Special-diet meals to be delivered right to door

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EAST WINDSOR — Millions of Americans with health problems who require therapeutic diets may soon be able to get the food they need delivered ready-made to their door.

A start-up company, MenuDirect Corp., is targeting this diverse group with a line of highly specialized food products and entrees.

The company's first distribution center will be in East Windsor at the former Axelrod Foods Inc. site. After completing renovations to the nearly 6,000-square-foot building, the company plans to launch the business in May.

MenuDirect initially will offer food free of the protein gluten for people who have trouble digesting wheat, oats, rye, barley and buckwheat. They also will offer a line of "consistency-modified" foods, such as purees, for those who have trouble swallowing. The company says

the foods will be of high quality, and will taste as good, or better, than foods that they replace.

Lou Cooperhouse, president and chief operating officer of MenuDirect, said home delivery of the frozen foods is a new concept in the field of prepared, specialized foods.

"We're going directly to the people," said Cooperhouse, 36, who lives in Manchester. "We're all about convenience."

The foods were created for MenuDirect by a team of six dietitians and chefs, and had their debut at the 1996 American Dietetic Association Meeting and Exhibition in San Antonio in October.

Some of the consistency-modified foods, which come in 3-ounce to 4-ounce packages, include peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, beef chili, and apple cinnamon french toast.

A week's worth of entrees for breakfast, lunch and dinner would cost about \$70, the company said.

Gluten intolerance affects chil-

dren and adults, and makes off-limits such foods such as cookies, pasta, malt flavorings, distilled vinegar, self-rising flour, breads and ice cream. Gluten-free products to be sold by MenuDirect include muffins, tortilla wraps and pizzas.

Starting in May, customers across the country will be able to order meal packs that will be shipped frozen from the East Windsor warehouse via Federal Express to a customer's door.

This fall, the company plans to contract with a courier service to begin delivering the ready-made foods using vans with insulated packing materials in the Hartford, Boston and New York region. MenuDirect is also looking at setting up other regional distribution centers for truck delivery service in Florida and northern California next year.

Cooperhouse and his partner, Carl Randall, 57, the company's chairman and chief executive officer, who lives in California, have

backgrounds in food science and business.

MenuDirect was incorporated in Pleasanton, Calif., in 1992.

The California headquarters will focus on marketing and corporate finance and administration.

The East Windsor site, in addition to being a distribution center, will have a customer service division and a research and development test kitchen for new-product development.

The company will provide about 25 jobs between Connecticut and California by the end of 1997, and expects to have 70 employees between the two sites by the end of 1998.

MenuDirect will design the food products, then hire other companies to prepare them to the company's specifications. They'll then be shipped to MenuDirect, and from there, will be reshipped to the customers.

Firm to home-deliver special-diet meals

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Nadine Pazder, outpatient dietitian at Morton Plant Hospital in Clearwater, Fla., makes home visits to people on special diets — stroke and throat cancer patients, for example.

She said the task of preparing special meals for these people is demanding for those who care for them.

She said other services, such as Meals on Wheels, deliver pureed

service could be another option, and would be particularly useful to people with gluten intolerance who generally have to order foods in larger quantities from clearing-house-type companies.

By the end of this year, MenuDirect plans to set up kiosks in hospitals, health clubs, office parks, pharmacies and fitness centers, initially selecting about six locations. The staffed kiosks will feature pre-packaged health foods that will include entrees, salads and