

**At Your Service**

**Conveniences for city living**

By Jennifer Birch

It's five thirty and you are still at your desk, not even close to finishing the presentation you're working on. Your belly is starting to growl, and you need to get to the cleaners by six thirty or you won't have a clean suit for your meeting tomorrow. You try not to think about what your dog, who desperately wants a walk by six, might be doing to the slippers you forgot to put in the closet when you dashed out the door with your coffee and briefcase. Forget about stopping by the grocery store. If you move your car, you'll be circling the block all night looking for a spot. It is leftover lo mein in front of the TV tonight.

And it's no wonder you are feeling stretched. According to the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, our cost of living remains one of the highest in the country. Before you pack up and head to Oregon, remember that your hard work pays off - we also have the third-highest disposable income in the United States.

There is no shortage of ways in our fair city to dispose of that income when it comes to making your life a little easier, a little more luxurious, or just plain better. Have a dog? Hire a dog walker. Tired of spending your entire Saturday morning at the laundromat? Have somebody pick up and fold. Leaving town? There's even someone to coddle your cat, water your plants, and collect your papers.

"When I got my promotion," said Financial District marketing consultant Julie Pearl, "the first luxury I decided on was laundry service. I don't have washers and dryers in my building so I would end up spending three or four hours a week at the Laundromat. I couldn't stand it! Laundry is absolutely my most hated chore."

**Alabaster Cleaners** (<http://www.alabastercleaners.com>) will pick up your laundry and dry cleaning anywhere at any time. "We like to ask, 'why go to the cleaners when the cleaner can come to you?'" said owner Anwar Jaafar. They even offer same-day service if your items are picked up the following morning before heading to the office.

Freeing up those few hours a week will give you a little more breathing room for grocery shopping, to schedule a dentist appointment, or for having fun. And if you don't want to worry about losing your parking space, or if you've ditched car-ownership entirely, consider those lime green Beetles you've seen driving around town. Sick of exorbitant tickets? Outraged at having to pay out the nose at the pump? City CarShare might be your answer.

Eliot Dobris, City CarShare's director of marketing and communications, (415-995-8588 or [www.citycarshare.org](http://www.citycarshare.org)) said that, "the average cost of owning a [new] car in San Francisco is about \$800 per month. The typical City CarShare bill for one month is \$20 to \$60," Dobris said. Not only can you save a bundle, they have free reserved parking all over the city with plenty of spots Downtown. And if the VW bug won't exactly accommodate that shopping spree at IKEA, they also have wagons, trucks, and are expanding their line of hybrid cars, too. You don't have to fill the tank, pay for insurance, and have the car washed before dropping it off. How it works: you join and pay a \$300 refundable security deposit. You then are given an electronic key and password to make reservations and pick up the cars at any of the 40 reserved spots. For \$4 an hour and \$0.44 cents a mile, it's one of the best ways to "own" a car in the city.

"We have a spot at Polk and Bush that's great for people who need to do some shopping or have to go to a doctor's appointment on their lunch break."

And what better way to spend an evening at home after your day of errands than to sit down to a home cooked meal. Of course, there have been no fridge miracles reported in the city lately. That leftover lo mein and carton of yogurt that were there when you left in the morning have not transformed into fresh spinach salad and baked ziti. Time to make a phone call, not for take out, but for a chef.

"I know it seems like hiring a personal chef is just something rich people do," said Nob Hill resident Matt Maroney, "But after my wife and I tallied up what we were spending on restaurants every week, hiring a chef to cook our weekday meals was actually cheaper, and we are finally spending more time together without shouting over the clang at busy restaurants."

Chef Coco, owner and operator of **Flour Girl Personal Chef Service** (415-948-6410 or [www.flourgirlchef.com](http://www.flourgirlchef.com)), meets with clients to plan a menu, which can include favorite family recipes or special dietary restrictions. She then shows up with bags of groceries and cooks up a storm in your kitchen. "My average clients include busy working singles who don't have the time or inclination to prepare home cooked meals for one and two-income couples with and without children, overwhelmed new parents, and women receiving medical treatments who are simply too fatigued to prepare meals for themselves and their families."

Her most requested dish? Not the haute cuisine you might have guessed, but chicken potpie with flaky cream cheese crust. "I always decorate the crust with cutout leaves or other designs so it's pretty enough for company. It's the ultimate comfort food," she said.

After enjoying your home-cooked meal, what better way to relax than to scoop up some ice cream and tune into your favorite cable TV show? But, wait, you don't have cable because there was never a convenient four-hour block during the middle of the day in which you could sit at home waiting for the Cable guy to show up. You need a mini-you, a personal assistant.

Hire a concierge. They aren't just for booking theater tickets or making reservations, they can also show up to organize your closet while waiting for the plumber or cable guy to show up. "Essentially, my job varies every day, depending on what my client's needs are," said Lisa Tunney, owner and operator of **The Personal Concierge** (357 3rd Avenue 415-751-1069 or [www.thepersonalconcierge.com](http://www.thepersonalconcierge.com)). "For example, today I am in charge of a business event of 19 educators. Tomorrow, I am running errands and shopping for another client, and on Friday I will be organizing a client's closet. Most of the services I offer myself. If I don't do them, then I partner with other vendors, such as housecleaners and movers to assist the client."

Don't forget to get an assistant for your furry friend. France Westlund has taken her affection for cats to professional status as the owner and operator of **Bon Voyage Pet Sitting** ([www.bonvoyagepetsitting.com](http://www.bonvoyagepetsitting.com)). While you're on vacation, she will drop by every day to play with and care for your cat, as well as keep your houseplants alive and pick up your mail and papers. Check out her website for other pet resources too, and don't forget



ABOVE: A Volkswagen Beetle parked at a CarShare pod;

Chef Coco Jacobs cooks dinner in a client's kitchen.

Photographs by Duncan Sharp, Ben Miller



[www.craigslist.org](http://www.craigslist.org) for dog walkers if you are worried your pooch is spending too much time alone, eating your couch.

"I used to be so jealous of people out enjoying the city," said Cheryl Kent, HR manager who recently hired a dog walker as well as a twice-monthly personal assistant to attend to her extra shopping and organizing needs. "I would spend all my time just trying to keep up with my life, always feeling like I had forgotten something. But with just a little bit of help every now and then, I remember why I like living here so much." If you are feeling a little green trying to keep up with your own hectic life, slow down, write a check, and enjoy your success.

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