

**You Are Where You Eat:
Thinking about How “Dining Out” Really Affects Us**
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America is currently enshrined in an age where even the most simplistic and mundane of tasks are not protected from the red-penned analysis of all-knowing social commentators and elitist experts from academic fields that no one even knew existed. These world-class specialists publish reports every day professing that people are rearing their children incorrectly, turning a blind eye to their community, participating improperly in the political spectrum and compromising the delicate environment. It has become virtually impossible to find an activity that one can complete without having an authority claim that at least a portion of the act was harmful.

One of these cherished “untouched” areas had been the ability to eat a meal out at a restaurant. That is, until Eric Schlosser, author of the best seller *Fast Food Nation*, had the audacity to ruin even that for us. In his modern Upton-Sinclairian exposé, Schlosser reprimanded the American public for taking the act of eating at a fast food joint for granted. Unfortunately, like many of the other experts, Schlosser is absolutely correct.

Almost four years and well over one million copies later, Schlosser has succeeded in opening the public’s eyes to the secrets of the fast food industry. However, once Schlosser introduced the idea of examining how Americans eat, few others have taken the opportunity to investigate and give additional insight into this intriguing field.

Schlosser’s work has shown us that our eating habits do have a great effect on our lives, and as such, there is no comprehensible justification for feigning ignorance and pretending that this increase in eating out does not affect us. We must expand the lens through which we examine our eating habits. The view has to be expanded from simply declaring the consumption

of McDonald's food taboo to truly inspecting the practice of eating any food that has been commercially prepared. We must scrutinize the nutritional, economic, sociological and familial effects that the "simple" act of eating out has on our lives.

According to a 2000 report released by the National Restaurant Association, Americans over the age of seven eat 4.2 commercially prepared meals a week, out of a total of 18.6 meals consumed. This figure has increased 113 percent since 1981 when Americans ate only 3.7 meals weekly that were prepared outside of the home. That translates into Americans eating over one billion meals annually that were not home-cooked (Ebbin para.1-3).

Nutritionists estimate that Americans consume approximately a third of their caloric intake outside of the home— almost double that of 1977, only twenty-five years earlier. This is coupled with the fact that meals prepared at restaurants are higher in fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium than meals that are prepared at home, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The USDA also notes that commercially prepared meals tend to be lower in calcium, iron and fiber than their home-cooked counterparts (Jacobson and Hurley para. 2-4).

Executive Director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) Michael F. Jacobson and CSPI senior nutritionist Jayne G. Hurley discuss the increase in consumption of commercially prepared food: "When people eat out only occasionally, it hardly mattered what they ate. But now for many people, restaurant foods can have a tremendous impact on their health— for better or for worse. Too many calories promote obesity. Too much saturated fat and trans fat— from solid shortening— promote heart disease. Too much salt promotes high blood pressure and stroke" (Jacobson and Hurley para. 3).

These facts cannot be summarily dismissed as meaningless scientific findings manipulated by nutritionists to scare the public. The obesity rate of American teens has tripled

and the obesity rate of American adults has doubled in the past twenty years (Jacobson para. 3). Americans have been getting fatter without asking why— a trend that needs to stop. It is a certainty that this obesity trend is a by-product of the increase in consumption of commercially prepared food during the same period.

Some claim that this isn't as big a problem as nutritionists make it out to be, as Americans seem to be taking it upon themselves to reverse this pattern. In 2003, the NPD Foodgroup (a market research company employed by the restaurant industry) reported in its *19th Annual Report on Eating Patterns in America* that for the first time since 1995 (when they first began tracking this statistic) the percentage of overweight Americans did not increase from the previous year (NPD Foodgroup para. 3).

Vice President of the NPD Foodgroup, Harry Balzer expounds, “We knew at some point, that this trend toward obesity would end, we just didn't know when. But remember we haven't seen people begin to lose weight just yet, however this is a good sign” (qtd. in NPD Foodgroup para. 4). The average number of commercially prepared meals consumed in the same time period as the study remained virtually the same, increasing just slightly.

This plateau in obesity levels can be attributed to many things, such as the extreme popularity of a handful of “fad diets” in the past decade. Even restaurants are taking up the “healthful food” kick, as restaurants like TGI Friday's and Subway now offer Atkins-friendly options and McDonald's removed the super-size option from their menu. Yet another explanation is that the work of Schlosser and Morgan Spurlock, who in his documentary *Supersize Me*, ate at McDonald's three meals a day for a month, has begun to catch on.

However, most nutrition experts credit this one year statistic to a mere fluke and postulate that hopes for an improvement in Americans' health cannot be based on a twelve-month time

period. Ferdinand Metz, President of the Culinary Institute of America argues, “People still talk more nutrition than they practice. It may take another decade until the habits are fully changed. People budget their calories today. Nutrition is not what you do at one meal” (qtd. in Kapner para. 66).

Famous French chef and cookbook author Jacques Pepin agrees with Metz: “People talk carrots, but eat chocolate cake” (qtd. in Kapner para. 65). While it is debatable what the status of American weight would be over the next ten years without further intervention, there is no question that there is quite a bit more that can be done to insure that American health improves.

The nutritional effects of eating out are the most widely discussed of all the negatives, but are certainly not the only consequences of this recent trend. Not to be forgotten are the economics of eating out. Over half of all consumer food dollars are spent eating out at restaurants, an amount equivalent to 4.5 percent of the U.S. GDP (Cetron para.1). This figure is even more impressive if you consider that Americans are spending over half of all the money they spend on food on only 22.6 percent of their meals (Ebbin para.1-3).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Food Services and Drinking Places have grossed 325.59 billion dollars in the first ten months of 2004 alone (United States Department of Commerce). Assuming that Americans continue to eat out at the same rate over the next two months as they have for the previous ten (using population figures from the 2000 Census), we could determine that on average, the annual per capita spending for commercially prepared food and drink is \$1562.83 per person.

According to the National Restaurant Association’s study, members of families with an annual income under \$15,000 consume fewer commercially prepared meals per week (3.2) than those with incomes over \$75,000 (4.9) (Ebbin para.11). Despite this difference in consumption,

poorer Americans are still spending proportionately more on meals eaten outside the home than those with five times their income.

If a family of four with an annual income of \$15,000 were to even spend one third of the average expenditure on commercially prepared food (calculated above), they would be spending \$2083.77 per year. To put this in perspective, that family uses approximately 14 percent of their entire gross income for only 17 percent of the meals they consume. This means that they leave only 86 percent of their annual income for housing, transportation, utilities, clothing, a multitude of other expenses and the other 83 percent of their necessary meals.

A simplistic approach to this “problem” would be to conclude that poorer people should budget their money more conservatively. If only it were that easy. Perhaps part of the reason for the fact that poorer Americans spend a higher percentage of their income dining out is poor economic decision-making and “laziness,” but by no means is it the entire reason. We must investigate the motives behind the decisions of the economically disadvantaged to buy and consume commercially prepared food.

Convenience plays a major role in the decision to eat out. Those of a lower socioeconomic class are much more likely to work multiple jobs than those with larger incomes. As such, they often do not have the time or the energy after or in between jobs to prepare meals and resort to buying commercially prepared foods.

Furthermore, poorer families are often forced to place both parents (and at times older children) into the workforce. This move from the traditional norm of only one parent working is more apparent in poorer families than any other socioeconomic class. When one parent is at home all day or even part of the day it is much easier for him or her to prepare a meal for the family.

Another possible reason that people choose to eat out is that the sheer act of eating out is a symbol of status. In book groups, around the water cooler, or at playgroups, people discuss how good last night's restaurant meal was. While this tendency is often subconscious, this public statement displays their financial ability to pay for a restaurant meal.

Given the social significance placed on the financial capability to dine out, a stigma of sorts is placed upon an inability to respond in kind to a peer's statement recounting their latest experience at a restaurant. Sociologist Joanne Finkelstein discusses her belief regarding why consumers eat out: "The artifice of the restaurant makes...us...act in imitation of others, in accord with images, in response to fashions, out of habit, without need for thought and self scrutiny" (5).

"To dine out in [high scale restaurants] is to pursue social aspirations well removed from gastronomic interests; it is to use the restaurant's reputation and status as a means for self-enhancement. By dining there one is saying one can afford it," Finkelstein continues (Finkelstein 73).

While Finkelstein focuses on eating out in order to reconfirm social status for wealthy classes, it could be reasonably argued that those with less disposable income do the same thing. People of lower income are participating in the same social system by eating at a fast food restaurant. While in a wealthier social circle, eating at McDonald's may be looked down upon, in a poorer socio-economic group it is proof of financial flexibility.

If these theories bear out, they indicate that the poor are eating out more because of a socially-motivated impulse for status and a need for convenience, since both parents must be in the workforce, which is itself exacerbated by poor financial decision making. This, in short,

means that the issue is far more complex than it appears to be on the surface and thus more difficult to identify solutions.

To make matters worse, those with lower levels of income face a greater health risk than those with higher income levels, despite the fact that they eat out less often. We can, of course, attribute this reality to the fact that individuals with incomes under \$15,000 are more likely to eat at a fast food restaurant than a casual-dining or up-scale restaurant.

The health effects of the financial limitation to choose where one eats out are demonstrated in the difference in the nutritional content of comparable meals at McDonald's and Ruby Tuesdays. An American Cheeseburger and fries at Ruby Tuesdays has about 1,100 calories and 70 grams of fat (Ruby Tuesdays) compared to a Double Quarter Pounder with Cheese and medium french fries at McDonald's which has about 1,300 calories and 80 grams of fat (McDonald's Corporation). While both of these meals have much higher fat and caloric content than is recommended, the same meal is worse for your health at McDonald's than it is at the "nicer" restaurant.

To make matters worse, the details about the nutritional content of meals at restaurants is largely unavailable to the diner. Only recently did companies like McDonald's or Ruby Tuesday release their information, and many other restaurants like TGI Friday's and Applebee's have not made most of their products' information public. Restaurants have no legal obligation to release such statistics and have made a public relations decision not to do so. However, this intelligent business decision is hurting the American public's ability to make healthy decisions when eating out.

The government has been almost entirely silent on this issue, passing little meaningful legislation. A probable explanation for the government's absence can be attributed to the intense

lobbying that the food service industry does every year. As Morgan Spurlock points out in his documentary *Supersize Me*, the restaurant industry spends millions of dollars every year in order to make sure that politicians are putting their interests before those of the public good (Spurlock).

Blaming this entire problem on the government or on the corporate world of food service is far too simplistic, however. Changes in the nature of the workplace can be held responsible for the decrease in the frequency of eating a home-cooked meal. Due to various factors including the women's equality movement and economic necessity, the number of women in the workforce nationwide has increased substantially. Working women—who typically used to handle this burden—do not tend to have time to shop for and prepare meals every evening (Kapner para.35).

“We’re still groping to figure out who’s going to take care of our food needs... That’s why even though the restaurant industry is having some difficulty right now, long-term prospects are bright, because Mom does not want to cook,” Balzer opines (qtd. in Perlik para.6). This, coupled with the growing idea that cooking is more of a recreational activity than a necessity, spells out a bleak future for the home-cooked meal.

A corollary to the decrease in numbers of stay-at-home mothers is the quality of American life that features a seemingly constant perpetual rush from one event to the next. This contributes to the mass consumption of fast food and the increase of “eating on the run.” The negative health effects that result from the fast pace of American life include the increase in consumption of the nutritional wasteland of fast food meals and the fact that eating quickly is harmful to the digestive system.

One of the largest consequences of the decrease in the number of home-cooked meals is the disappearance of the family meal. According to a 2004 AOL/*Parenting* survey, 46 percent of

families claim to eat a meal as a family every day and 34 percent say that they manage to eat together only a few times a week (“Mealtime Confessions” para. 1-4). Families now place less and less significance on sitting down with each other every night and eating a meal. What once was a steadfast tradition is now a happenstance occasion. This is a subject that has yet to be explored to any significant extent, but is one that has the potential to have drastic effects on the strength of the family unit.

Experts in the field of child-raising constantly stress the importance of parents spending time as a family and having an open line of communication. The family meal was a guaranteed hour (approximately) in which the family sat down and talked about their day. While this may not seem to be extremely important on the surface, this daily communication allows parents to have an idea of what is going on in their children’s lives and thus make sure that they are attentive to their children’s needs. With the family meal’s disappearance, there is no guarantee that families will talk on a regular basis and as such allows for children who may need attention or parental intervention of a behavior to go unchecked.

Not only does the disappearance of the family meal have vast negative familial consequences, it has nutritional ones as well. According to a recent study, teenagers who eat six meals a week or more with their parents are forty percent more likely to get the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables. While this seems to be an obvious fact, the survey reports that this fact holds true even if the children are given free rein as to what they eat (Sexton para.1-4).

We have determined that the tendency of Americans to eat out is causing drastic nutritional harm, making the poor poorer and less healthy and weakening the family unit. This brings us to the all important question. If this is all in fact true, what do we do about it?

The first thing that must be recognized is that the government is not going to pass any helpful legislation regulating disclosure of the nutrition levels of commercially prepared foods. Politicians are far too concerned about maintaining levels of campaign contributions from food service industry lobbyists to even consider regulation. This means that changes are going to have to come on a personal level; the American public needs to spark a movement, in which people think critically about their own choices in regards to how they eat.

The first thing we can do is to make an effort to eat more healthfully when we do dine out. While restaurant food is less nutritious than its home-cooked counterparts, in general, there are a number of ways to eat in a relatively healthy manner while consuming commercially prepared foods. The human body requires a variety of substances, so meals containing a healthy balance of lean proteins (fish, chicken, and beans for example), fruits and vegetables and complex carbohydrates is better than eating a meal with a concentration in simple carbohydrates and fatty proteins (Black para.8).

Americans must also pay close attention to their portion sizes. In the 1950s the average size of a hamburger was about one and a half ounces, whereas a “supersized” burger today weighs over five times that much (eight ounces). To remedy this, nutritionists suggest that consumers ask for half portions, share entrées with friends or take half of their meal home. Other practices like asking for sauces on the side and applying them sparingly, using low-fat milks instead of cream, ordering baked, broiled or grilled meats (instead of fried) or choosing fresh fruit over sugary high-fat desserts will allow consumers to maintain a relatively healthy diet while eating commercially prepared meals (Black para. 9-13).

However, simply eating out more intelligently won't solve the whole problem. In order to promote more home-cooked meals, Americans could take up the practice of meal-cooperatives.

A meal coop brings together a group of approximately five families, under an agreement that each family cooks one large meal weekly, which is subsequently distributed to the other four families. The result is such that each family has five meals for the week, reducing the stress of parents trying to cook in the middle of the week. Not only does this provide for more home-cooked meals, cooking in bulk is often easier and more cost-effective than cooking individual meals.

Meal cooperatives aren't the only way to promote consumption of more home-cooked meals; another alternative to eating out is the practice of community dinners. Community dinners are best run by a group of organizations (often religious establishments) that rotate on a weekly basis. The groups coordinate multiple members to cook bulk meals and bring them to a centralized location where anyone from the community can come and eat for free.

This solution often works better in smaller communities, but isn't impossible in larger ones. All that community meals require is a small individual effort every month or two and result in a grand event that not only brings together community, but also promotes healthful eating for poorer families. Less financially flexible families whose parents may not have time to participate in a meal cooperative can eat a regular home-cooked meal through the advent of community dinners.

Perhaps the most important issue of all and the hardest to solve is the demise of the family unit as a result of the disappearance of the family meal. Perhaps the solution to this problem is the most simplistic and yet the most difficult of all. It is necessary that families set aside a time at least four days a week (preferably more) and eat dinner together.

For many families this will take a tremendous effort in order to coordinate parents' work and meeting schedules with their children's activity schedules. However, this is not an

impossible mission, a fact that parents nationwide need to recognize. It is of utmost importance that families spend mealtime together, for if they don't there is a great potential that we are raising a generation of troubled children.

America has, for the most part, come to this recognition and begun to adapt to the realization that today's world is entirely different from the one that generations past experienced. However, we have neglected to address the most fundamental actions that we complete on a daily basis. As the saying goes, it's the simple things in life that count the most. It is time to stop passively dismissing the most essential actions we go through every day and reevaluate the way we are living in this new age.

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