

ANY TIME, ANY PLACE, ANYWHERE

CAN SUNDAY LUNCH SURVIVE IN THE GRAZING AGE? ASKS CHLOE DISKI

Britain's dining habits are changing. We are shaking off the shackles of the traditional three-meals-a-day and a formal Sunday lunch, and demanding that eating fits into our time-constricted lifestyles. Take Sunday lunch, traditionally a meal that gave families the chance to debate, sing or storm off in the privacy of their own home. My family religiously attended these, often heated, weekly occasions at my grandparents' house. Then my grandmother, the designated cook, died, and Sunday lunch adjourned to the local pub, forcing us to behave because we were "in public".

My experience was typical. In the past 10 years we have become a nation addicted to eating out. High employment, more women working full-time, and the rise of cheap food have made restaurants so popular that now 96 per cent of us dine out. Sunday lunch is still the most popular time, closely followed by Saturday night. With only one in five families owning a dining table, most of our meals at home are now spent conversing over the sound of the TV. This mightn't be as bad as it sounds: new research shows that TV is an effective mediator, creating feelings of comradeship that are often missing from sit-down family meals.

Set meals seem to be disappearing altogether; our breakfast extends into lunch, and lunch into dinner. London's most fashionable restaurants have taken note, such as the Wolsley, on Piccadilly, which is now best known as a breakfast and teatime destination. We have become so used to eating at odd hours of the day that many of us are celebrating those times, bringing back quaint traditions that were invented by bored Victorian wives to pass the time. Now we don't have the time to ignore them. Teatime, for instance, is suddenly the new lunch with glamorous teashops opening across London. Top-end restaurants such as Sketch off Regent Street and Soho's trendy Chinese restaurant, Yauatcha, turn out designer teacakes, and there's a

six-week waiting list for tea at the Ritz in the summer.

Soon we will be able to indulge our sweet tooth all day long. In the States people skip whole courses and go to dessert bars, where they indulge in myriad puddings. It can be only a matter of time before we see them here. Smaller portions and what used to be thought of as snacks, such as canapés, are also becoming our staple. In Liverpool's Hope Street Hotel, you can even receive romantic breakfast canapés including bite-sized bacon and eggs.

Nicholas Watts, head chef of Roka, in London's Fitzrovia, sees how eating habits are relaxing. "We used to close the kitchen at 3pm," he says, "but our customers were still requesting orders throughout the afternoon, particularly in summer months." Sociologist Alan Warde identifies Britons' heavy workload as a key factor affecting our round-the-clock hunger. "British people work such long and flexible hours that it makes sense to combine our leisure time with practical matters like eating," he explains.

We're buying cookbooks by the million, fantasising that we'll be just like our grandmothers presiding over the family table, but actually we never have a minute to open them. Instead, our cooking time is spent ringing our local takeaway. The problem with that is you don't meet new people at home. Concepts like the Lunch Club are a recent phenomenon, providing a way for strangers to meet for lunch. It has a staggering 10,000 members worldwide, 500 of which have joined in the UK since it launched here last year. My grandmother would have been horrified by so many lonely diners, but perhaps people eating out together or discussions round the TV is no worse than a sit-down ruckus round the family table. **GFR**



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