

TASTE

# Much Depends on Dinner

*By Cameron Stracher*

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The recent death of Gerry Thomas, whom many credit with inventing the TV dinner (think Swanson), draws to a close the kinder, gentler era when happy families gathered around a television set, aluminum trays in hand, enjoying their chopped sirloin beef and sweet green peas in seasoned butter sauce while laughing at the wacky antics of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. Today, televisions are a lot bigger (and flatter), the frozen-food industry has grown into a \$30 billion business and the chances of getting everyone to sit down for dinner at the same time are a lot slimmer. Instead, we are a nation of take-outers and drive-throughers, eating our meals on the go, dining by ourselves and laughing alone. The family dinner has become an endangered species, the victim of our own ingenuity and productivity.

These days, fewer than one-third of all children sit down to eat dinner with both parents on any given night. The statistics are worse if both parents are working and the family is Caucasian (Latino families have the highest rate of sharing a meal). The decline in the family dinner has been blamed for the rise in obesity, drug abuse, behavioral problems, promiscuity, poor school performance, illegal file sharing and a host of other ills.

A recent study at the Harvard Medical School, for example, concluded that the odds of being overweight were 15% lower among those who ate dinner with their family on "most days" or "every day" compared with those who ate with their family "never" or on "some days." The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found that teens from families that almost never eat dinner together are 72% more likely to use illegal drugs, cigarettes and alcohol than the average teen and that those who eat dinner with their parents less than three times a week are four times more likely to smoke cigarettes, three times more likely to smoke marijuana and twice as likely to drink as those who eat dinner with their parents at least six times a week.

In my home, I rarely eat dinner with my two children and wife more than twice a week. Because I commute 55 miles to Manhattan, I seldom return before 7:30 or 8 at night, which is simply too late for our nine-year-old and six-year-old to eat. Instead, my wife feeds them microwaved chicken nuggets, hot dogs, plain pasta and other staples from the children's food pyramid. Sometimes she will wait for me; more often I pick up something at Grand Central and eat on the train.

Even on days when we are all together, our dinner table resembles a diner, with each family member ordering his own meal. My son will eat pasta with pesto, but not with red sauce, while his sister loves the latter but hates the former. She will eat hamburgers and chicken, while my son will only eat hot dogs. Neither likes cereal with milk, but my daughter adores milk and cereal (just not together). My son can't stand either. We accommodate their pickiness because we can and because it's easier than the consequences if we don't.

In my absence from dinner, I am not alone. My evening train is packed with men and women shoveling burritos, couscous or pizza into their mouths, while firing off

messages on their BlackBerries. Among my friends, I know few who sit down to eat with their children on the weekends, let alone the weekday. Instead they arrive just in time to plant a kiss on the moist forehead of a drowsy babe, then retire downstairs to the computer.

The causes for the incredible disappearing family dinner are many. As women have entered the work force in greater numbers, fewer hands are available to shop and cook. Both parents are working longer hours and commuting farther, which makes it harder to get home in time to share a meal. Children are busier, too, overcommitted to school and sports and other activities, which has made coordinating dinner time more difficult. Finally, the plethora of fast-food choices exemplified by the TV dinner, though partly an effect of our changing style of life, is also a cause: The easier it is to pick up or microwave something on the run, the less likely we are to share our meal with others.

There is also another reason for the decline in shared mealtimes, one rarely spoken about: Parents don't want to eat with their children. Arlie Russell Hochschild noted in "The Time Bind" (1997) that as home becomes more like work, and work becomes more like home, there are fewer reasons to rush back in time for dinner. Most men say that, if given a choice between time or money, they would choose the former; in fact, they choose the latter. After all, who wants to deal with a six-year-old having a temper tantrum because there is green stuff on her pasta? Much easier to stay at the office, order in, drink a beer and trudge home when the kids are asleep. Even in families where both parents are at home, they often wait until the kids are in bed to eat. As one mother told me: "It's just not fun to eat with them."

As food preparation has become easier, meals quicker and distractions ubiquitous, it's tempting to view the family dinner as simply another choice from columns A, B or C. Just as television has splintered its viewing audience, TV dinners have splintered the dining audience. When anyone can eat alone, few eat together.

And that's a shame. Because dinner is like a formal poem, with a fixed meter and time. It can't be hastened by new technology or emailed as an attachment to our kitchens. Instead, it's one of the few opportunities for conversation in a noisy world, a place to take a slower measure of our frenzied days. By missing mealtime, we are missing a substantial part of our children's lives. Sooner than we realize, they will not be at our table. Sooner than that, they will not want to have anything to do with us.

Right now my own son's head is filled with baseball statistics that he cannot wait to share. My daughter is obsessed with iTunes, and wants to know what every song means, even when the lyrics go: "I'm your boogie man / I'm your boogie man / Turn me on." Instead of answering their questions, however, weeks pass when I do not know what they are learning in school, who they are playing with, what they do when I'm not around.

But I'm trying to mend my ways. So when my son asked me, a few days ago, whether I'd be home early or late, I told him I'd be taking the 5:03. "What do you want for dinner?" I asked. "How about Chinese?" he said. It was a start.

**Mr. Stracher is publisher of the New York Law School Law Review. His blog may be found at [www.dinnerwithdad.com](http://www.dinnerwithdad.com).**

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