

Eileen F. Taylor

100 Million Times a Day, Americans Eat Out

More than 100 million times in each day, someone has a meal or snack in a fancy restaurant, a college cafeteria, a snackbar, or a hospital. If we picked up the check for all the meals and snacks we Americans eat away from home in a year, it would amount to a whopping \$22 billion.

Sounds impressive? Well, it is—and it's getting more so every year. We like to eat out, and just about everyone does so at one time or another. At least once a month, about 100 million of us have dinner at a restaurant; 66 million go out for breakfast and twice this number eat lunch away from the home.

Among us, however, "who" eats out and "when" varies considerably. During the day, working people represent the largest share of customers, but in the evening, students are important, especially at the informal eating places like drive-ins.

Men alone or in groups make up the bulk of customers during breakfast and lunch hours. At dinnertime, family groups take over. Later in the evening, couples predominate.

We Americans like to take the whole family out—to give mother a break

once in a while. Our children go along about half the time. Those between the ages of 6 and 12 are included most often. As most parents would guess, the younger ones are at home with a babysitter. Teenagers tend to want to go on their own.

Overall, the postwar "baby boom" has provided millions of new customers for the restaurant industry. In fact, total spending for food away from home has gone up at a faster rate than population. And restaurants catering to the under-35 groups have been growing even faster than the food service industry as a whole.

"Where" we eat varies considerably. However, basically it is at one of two types of places—at an institution like a hospital, college, or camp or at some kind of public eating place—a restaurant, cafeteria, snackbar, drive-in, and the like.

Although institutions represent a small share of all eating places, they are important in the number of people they serve. For example, the average college serves 10 times as many meals and snacks each day as the average public eating place.

But the typical American looking for a place to have lunch or one to take his family to for dinner isn't concerned about the meals being served in institutions. He will choose one of the 344,000 public eating places. It could be a spot to get a sandwich in a hurry, to take home a bucket of fried chicken, to stand in a cafeteria line for lunch, or to enjoy a leisurely dinner in a softly lighted dining room.

The family going out for dinner is apt to go to a restaurant located near home. They shouldn't have a difficult time finding one open because the average restaurant operates more than 13 hours a day, 6½ days a week, throughout the year. This restaurant is likely to have tables or booths, and possibly counter and carry-out service as well. Usually the menu will offer a

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variety of American plate meals rather than a particular food like seafood or oriental dishes.

But many kinds of eating places make up this average. For example, drive-in service is much more important in suburbs and rural areas than in central business districts. Counter service is more important in these areas. In small eating places—those with yearly sales of less than \$20,000—sandwiches and refreshments are the most important specialty; those that specialize in seafoods, chops, steaks, and roast beef are likely to have sales of \$100,000 or more.

Although most eating places are still independently owned, chain operations are growing in importance. A major reason for this is customer recognition. As we get accustomed to the style, the food, and the service associated with a certain name, we quickly recognize these wherever they are located—in our city or far from home. The golden arches and the orange roof have become landmarks because they are easy to recognize.

There are other reasons, too—chains have the necessary staff and resources to do research and invest in market studies. They have the experience and the talent to open a new eating place and make a success of it. Some chains have taken advantage of the rapid growth in the suburbs and specialized in drive-ins that appeal to young families. Some have diversified into the

institutional field. Some offer prepared food for the customers to take home; others have developed their own brand of frozen foods so that their name is seen in grocery stores as well.

Urban living, working far from the home, increased travel around the country and the world, and even television have helped to make our tastes more diverse. Our away-from-home eating places tempt us by featuring everything from a full course steak dinner to shrimp creole to chow mein to a 20-cent hamburger. Though the largest share of eating places feature American-type meals, or sandwiches and refreshments, some specialize in Italian or oriental foods, roast beef, seafood, chicken, and steaks.

And our tastes are somewhat fickle. We always seem to be searching for something new or different. Last year's standbys—beef stew, creamed dishes, hash, and liver—appear to be “out” these days. Main dish salads, barbecued foods, pizzas, feature sandwiches, and diet specials are “in.” So are a la carte menus, and especially those that include extravagant desserts.

The owner of a restaurant has to be constantly on the alert for changes in the kinds of food that will please his customers. A look at what's popular with the school lunch crowd—pizza, barbecued beef, or hamburgers—helps to guide the menu planner aiming at family groups. Even sales by his competitor—the grocer—can help. For

A family dining out.



example, young marrieds with small children may not have much extra money. But they remember how they ate at home before they were married. Gourmet foods and sauces appeal to them, and they tend to choose these when they get a chance to eat out. Small town residents who do lots of baking at home may be intrigued by the eating place that features "home-style pastries."

The widespread popularity of certain foods has led to the growth of eating places featuring limited menus. Some drive-ins offer only one type of sandwich and a choice of beverages.

In some chain organizations, the technique of preparation and service has become such an exact science that we can expect a roast beef sandwich or hamburger we buy in Denver to taste the same as the ones back home in Baltimore. The menu, the surroundings, and the advertising too are all designed to attract those who want quick, informal, and inexpensive food served in a familiar atmosphere.

But what may be even more interesting than the menu in your favorite eating place is how the cook prepares your meal. New food processing techniques and high cost of labor have combined to make partially and fully prepared foods very attractive to restaurant owners. It is quite possible that the delicious looking beef stroganoff you are eating in California today was prepared and frozen in Connecticut weeks before, and possibly even months ago. When a waitress takes your order, the cook gets the entree from the freezer, puts it in a microwave oven, and it is ready to serve in seconds. If chicken salad is on the menu, the cook will open a can of dehydrated salad mix, add water, and chill. If you'd like an egg salad, he might open a bag of frozen diced eggs and use these in his favorite recipe.

Some restaurants have achieved what might seem to be the impossible—virtually no kitchen at all! With specially selected menu offerings, one employee can take frozen food from storage, heat it in a microwave oven, and seconds

later, serve it to the customer. This means that more space can be devoted to selling instead of being used for oversized preparation areas.

Many factors have combined to foster more eating away from home—to build an industry that, in a few years, may be serving us half our food. Important among these are the level of our incomes and where we live. Of these, our income is probably the most important. The more dollars we make, the more we spend for food away from our homes.

Studies have shown that the families with incomes of \$10,000 and over a year spent more than 25 percent of their food money for meals away from home; those with less than \$3,000 spent 10 percent. In actual dollars, the higher income families spent 10 times as much each week eating out as those in the low-income group.

When the wife works—as more than a third do now—the family is likely to eat out more often and to spend more doing so than a family having the same level of income with the wife not employed outside the home.

On the average, we spend about 5 percent of our household budgets for food away from home. There is some variation in this depending on where we live, however. Families in the West spent the most dollars. Families in the Northeast were the second biggest spenders, followed by families in the North Central States. Families in the South spent the fewest dollars, but in the last decade they have been increasing what they spend to eat out much more than families in other parts of the country. If we live in the city, rather than on the farm, we probably will spend more on eating out. But these differences, like those between the various regions, are becoming less pronounced.

This is our food service industry today. What will it be like in the years ahead?

To begin with, there will be more restaurants as the population increases and our take-home pay gets bigger. Today, there are more than 200 million

Americans. By 1975, there will be 25 million more of us, and 10 million more households. Younger families—those that are on the move and likely to eat out—will make up an even larger share of our population than they do now. Today, our median family income is a little more than \$8,000. A third of our families earn more than \$10,000. And it is predicted that by 1975 more than two-fifths of us will have incomes over \$10,000. Unless the cost of eating away from home goes up more rapidly than incomes, we'll have more people with more money to dine out more often.

More married women will be working away from home, so restaurants will be geared to demands of the working wife. Perhaps we'll see substantial growth of restaurants in the suburbs, because this is where many working wives live. New restaurants will be designed for evening dining out for the whole family, at a place close to home. In addition, many of us like to use dining out as an occasion to entertain friends—especially those of us who live in apartments with limited space. Some experts are suggesting the possibility of a modified American plan—a system of special pricing for five dinners a month eaten in the same restaurant, with the same couple as hosts and different guests for each dinner.

Our tastes will become more and more discriminating, so eating places will have to meet those ever higher standards of excellence that we expect.

Except for luxury-type and specialty restaurants which feature fine cuisine, chains and franchised operations will continue to grow rapidly. We'll be able to identify even more establishments and types of eating

places as we travel across the country.

Growth of the chains and the continuing importance of independently owned eating places mean that more and more people will be needed to work in and manage food service units. More than 150,000 openings a year are expected in the restaurant industry throughout the 1970's. Some of these will be new jobs as the industry grows, but most will be due to turnover. Even all of the new equipment and ready-to-serve foods won't ease the industry's need for good talent.

Restaurant kitchens will be smaller—some may even be virtually eliminated. Kitchen work will be cut down, but capable personnel to do the final preparation and serving of food will still be in demand. Opportunities for skilled chefs and restaurant managers will be especially favorable. For the restaurant industry of the future will service an even more sophisticated market and will need highly trained management people.

Finally we, the customers, will be eating out more and more. Retail grocery stores are already feeling the impact of the increased away-from-home spending and are trying to cope with this new competitor by offering such services as a delicatessen, ready-to-eat barbecued chickens and an expanded frozen food department that includes family size entrees.

As long as the present trends last, we will continue to spend our extra dollars for service—and one of the services we like the most is having someone else do our food preparation and cleaning up for us. The organization that provides that service best—restaurants, drive-ins, vending machines, or even grocery stores—will prosper in the 1970's.