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BUSINESS

Why Cooking Has Become a Lost Art

Today's on-the-go culture is fueling the popularity of prepared meals, round-the-clock snacking



When people do cook meals, they're making them with fewer ingredients rather than filling up a cart of groceries. PHOTO: DAVID KASNIC FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By *Julie Jargon and Heather Haddon*

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What are people eating? Increasingly, food that doesn't involve a lot of cooking.

One of the biggest changes that has rippled across the food industry is a loss of cooking skills, says food historian Andrew F. Smith. This is despite the popularity of cooking shows and Instagram food photos. "Grocery shopping now is buying prepared food," he says.

The trend is true across age groups, but is strongest among millennials, the nation's largest demographic group. About 42% of millennials' monthly food budget is spent on food prepared outside the home, more than any other generation, according to a survey of 1,500 U.S. consumers last year by Acosta. Millennials spent an average of \$202 a month on food prepared outside the home last year, up from an average of \$159 in 2015.

— ADVERTISEMENT —



Baby boomers, who don't often cook for large households, are also turning to prepared foods. Joan Shuman, a 68-year-old retired federal government employee in Eatontown, N.J., said she frequently buys prepared salads from Wegmans Food Markets Inc. to go along with her dinner.

The rise of dual-income and single-parent households too busy to cook has also fueled the trend. In today's on-the-go culture in which people feel so pressed for time they rarely leave their desks for lunch anymore, consumers are increasingly grabbing small bites. "What we've uncovered is round-the-clock snacking," Taco Bell Chief Executive Brian Niccol said in a recent interview.

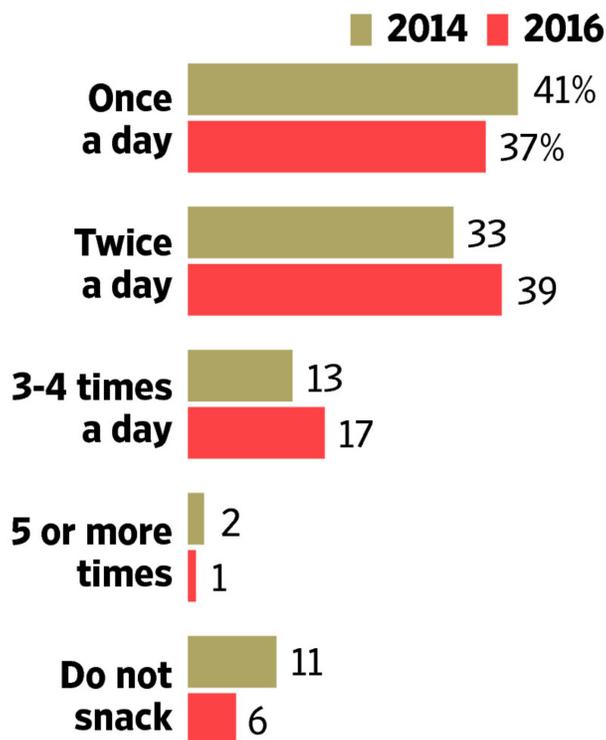
When they do cook meals, they're making them with fewer ingredients rather than filling up a cart of groceries. Meals are simpler now, often consisting of one dish with protein, vegetables and starch all mixed together. Meal composition has changed gradually over time, with dinner now consisting of 2.2 items, down 27% over the past 30 years, market research firm NPD Group Inc. says.

Subscription meal-kit services have also had an impact. NPD found that 5% of American households have used a meal kit at least once in the past 30 days and that food from the kits often stretches beyond just one meal. "That's at least one grocery visit that didn't happen," said NPD food analyst David Portalatin.

"It's easier for us to grab and go," said Holli Kempton, a 34-year-old married community college instructor from outside of Charlotte, N.C., who prefers to get a \$10 meal kit from her local Publix Super Markets Inc. store than spend the money on groceries or takeout.

Munchtime

Millennials are increasingly snacking their way through the day.



Note: Online survey with 2,565 respondents conducted March 14-15, 2016

Source: AlixPartners

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Consumers also are showing an increasing interest in stretching out their meals. Americans, on average, incorporated leftovers into meals 135 times last year, up from 124 times in 2012, Mr. Portalatin said. Even snacks are occasion to use leftovers, a Hartman Group survey found.

Part of the increasing willingness to use leftovers is that many consumers are trying to be more frugal. Mr. Portalatin said: “Millennials came of age during the recession so their economic reality was different than older, more established folks. Plus, they have some attitudes about food and beverages that are just different than previous generations.”

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