

# 'Table for one?' should not be an insult

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Joan Reminick, CNN

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(CNN) — Taking myself out to a local Japanese restaurant for dinner shouldn't have been a big deal, but it became one before I even picked up my chopsticks.

"Table for one," I said to the hostess, who didn't return my smile.

"Just one?" she asked.

It wasn't the first time I'd heard that question which, five months into widowhood, was beginning to grate. I wondered what could be so challenging about such a simple request.

About midway to my table, she stopped: "Only yourself?"

At that point, I lost it a little bit.

I told her this was the third time I was stating the number of people at my table, which would have been two, had my husband been alive and with me.

"I'm not trying to be mean," she said. "I just have to make sure."

## Why some women won't eat out alone

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To be sure of what? In that moment, I understood why so many women I know won't eat out alone. Nobody wants to be thrown back to being the shy kid in the school cafeteria who can't find a place to sit.

Ironically, I'm used to feeling right at home in restaurants.

For 25 years, I was a food critic for "Newsday," a major suburban New York newspaper, and I dined out at least five times a week.

While working on a story or review, it never bothered me to eat out by myself, but that was mainly at lunchtime. For evening visits to restaurants, I went out with my husband and, often, another couple. I couldn't order all the dishes I needed to try by myself. Our friends' presence made it easier to try everything and stay undercover.

I can see now that I was living in a "couple bubble."

## I still want to eat out

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Nowadays, I work as an independent restaurant consultant. On and off the job, I usually dine out with friends, both couples and singles. Nevertheless, I still want to be able to treat myself to a nice dinner out in my own company.

Other solo diners – a sizable contingent of America's restaurant-going population – seem to be avoiding the kind of situation I found myself in. Many prefer places where they can order at the counter and seat themselves.

Solo dining occasions comprise 27% of the total at fast casual restaurants – places such as Panera Bread or Chipotle, according to a 2016 study of restaurant visits by The Hartman Group, a Seattle-based market research organization.

At coffee shops, solo occasions comprise about half the total, while at fast casual restaurants such as McDonald's or Burger King, they make up about 38% of the total. But full-service restaurants reported that the number of solo dining occasions was too insignificant to quantify.

What does this say?

"Dinner occasions tend to be more social (with others) and more indulgent, so that's where full service-type restaurants fit in," said Hartman Group senior director of marketing Blaine Becker.

Maybe that's not true for everyone. While they might make up a small minority, people who like to treat themselves to a fine dining experience solo do exist.

## Women eat out alone, sometimes

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Wendy Richman, a freelance violist and adjunct professor of music at New York University, feels just fine indulging alone at full service restaurants, such as Vietnam on the Upper East Side and Sushi Yasaka on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Her comfort level at fine dining establishments varies with geography.

"In a lot of big cities, people don't even look twice when you're eating by yourself," she said. "I eat out alone the most in New York because it feels like the easiest culture. In the South, I do it less because I get looked at a little more."

Richman, who prefers a proper table to a seat at the bar, has also run up against the "just one" question, which she calls a micro-aggression. "I want to be defensive, but instead I stand up taller and say yes, just me."

## How to treat solo diners

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Nobody is questioning solo diners at Brooklyn's Krupa Grocery in the Windsor Terrace neighborhood, which was recently named one of the top eight restaurants in the borough for dining alone by Brooklyn Magazine. Co-owner/manager Thomas Sperduto said his restaurant doesn't treat singles differently than other diners.

"We just seat them," he said, noting that he asks where they'd prefer, at the bar or at a table. "Then I always make sure we de-set the table. It's awkward to leave a place setting when there's not going to be another person."

In the Long Island suburbs, a relatively short distance from Brooklyn, another kind of dining scene is dominated by couples and families. Single diners are a minority.

## Women can face hassles

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While chef-restaurateur Tom Schaudel has trained his staff to be sensitive to single diners, most eating solo at his restaurants (Jewel in Melville, aMano in Mattituck, A Lure in Southold and Kingfish in Westbury) opt to sit at the bar, he said.

Schaudel estimates the ratio of men to women at about 65% to 35%. He observes, though, that it's not always easy for women. "I've seen women eat at the bar and men making them feel uncomfortable."

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Overall, then, do men have fewer hassles eating out by themselves?

John Martillo, an aerospace engineer in Los Angeles, believes so. Martillo, who often takes himself out to eat when away on business, doesn't recall ever having been questioned.

Rather than feeling uncomfortable alone, Martillo relishes the time, always opting for a table. "I'll bring a book, sit down, enjoy a nice steak, read and people-watch. I enjoy the heck out of it."

We all want to be able to enjoy the heck out of eating alone -- to sit at a good table and scope out the scene, focus on what's on the plate and feel free to not converse with anyone.

So what's stopping us? Are restaurateurs afraid of giving up seating to someone whose check will, naturally, be smaller than the one at a table for two?

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## A satisfied solo diner may have friends

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The truth is that most restaurant personnel aren't even aware the "just one" question might offend anyone. They should be told.

As a restaurant consultant, my professional advice to those who own eating establishments is to train your staff to treat solo diners with care and sensitivity. Anyone whose job it is to seat guests should show singles to the best tables available -- and do so cheerfully and unquestioningly.

This is not only the right way to behave; it also shows savvy business sense. After all, a satisfied solo diner may show up a week later with a friend or two. Or four. Or even six.

Staying viable in the hospitality industry often comes down to just that: hospitality. It should be standard fare at every restaurant, at every table, for all and for one.

Joan Reminick is an independent restaurant consultant who, for 25 years, was a restaurant critic and food writer for Newsday. She eats out a lot more than she eats at home.