

# Eating Alone

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*Stephanie Rosenbloom* | Excerpt adapted from *Alone Time: Four Seasons, Four Cities, and the Pleasures of Solitude* | *Viking* | June 2018 | 14 minutes (3,719 words)

Comptoir Turenne is on the ground floor of a nineteenth-century building with battered shutters in the Haut-Marais, on the less fashionable end of rue de Turenne. On the more fashionable end, Glow on the Go! serves concoctions like the Lolita with organic cherries and “superfoods adaptogens,” Baby Beluga sells bikinis and matching sunglasses for Capri-bound toddlers, and the windows of Delphine Pariente’s jewelry shop (now known as *Nouvel Amour*) advise: *Soyez heureux*, be happy.

Comptoir Turenne has no such panache. Its sidewalk views are mainly of a real estate agency and a men’s suit shop. It is not on “must-eat” lists. Visitors are not burdened by the ghosts of Hemingway and Sartre to have an indelible experience. All of this makes Turenne a laid-back spot for breakfast *pour un*. You can sit under its cheerful red awnings, mere blocks from the action, and fancy yourself Parisian.

Portions, however, appear to be measured with Americans in mind. A croque madame arrived at the table looking as if it had been flown in from the Cheesecake Factory. A sunny-side-up egg was as big as a pancake. Beneath it, thick, crusty bread was covered in toasted cheese.

Beside it, french fries were piled in a little deep-fryer basket. A salad was already beginning to migrate off the plate. There was barely room on the table for my café crème and the speculoos tucked between the cup and saucer.

When you're not sitting across from someone, you're sitting across from the world.

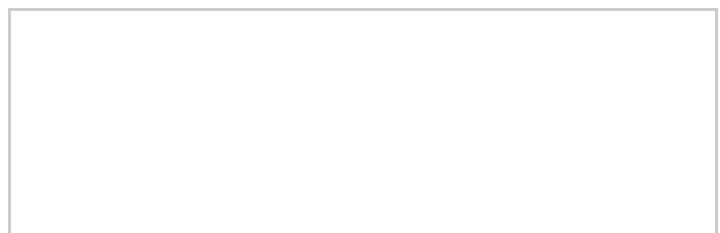
I eyed the speculoos. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh tells a story in *Peace Is Every Step* about being a child and taking half an hour, sometimes forty-five minutes, to finish a cookie that his mother bought him. "I would take a small bite and look up at the sky," he wrote. "Then I would touch the dog with my feet and take another small bite. I just enjoyed being there, with the sky, the earth, the bamboo thickets, the cat, the dog, the flowers."

I can polish off a speculoos in less time than it takes to say "speculoos." Nonetheless, Nhat Hanh's story resonates in an age when it's not unusual for a meal to be eaten with one hand while the other is posting a photo of it to Instagram. Men in suits stopped for coffee and cigarettes. Children were being walked to school. For the solo diner, no view is better than the one from the sidewalk, even the one from Comptoir Turenne. When you're not sitting across from someone, you're sitting across from the world.

I've eaten by myself in France more than anywhere else, with the exception of my own country where, more than half the time when we're eating, we're eating alone. That's more often than in any previous generation. Pressed for time at work or school, Americans frequently eat by themselves at breakfast and when snacking, according to the NPD Group, a market research company. More than half of lunch meals are solitary. And more than 30 percent of Americans have dinner alone because they're single or on a different schedule from their partner. The trend is being seen in other countries, too. In South Korea, for instance, it's largely being driven by long work hours, according to Euromonitor International. And while many may not be dining alone by choice, the fact that more people are doing it is changing perceptions. "Dining alone has not only become socially acceptable in South Korea," Euromonitor reported, noting that Seoul is an incubator for trends that resonate throughout East Asia and beyond, "it is almost fashionable."

Be that as it may, all too often the meals we have alone are rushed and forgotten, as if they didn't matter. In the United States, for instance, dining alone has led to what the Hartman Group, a food and beverage consultancy, has called the "snackification of meals." Certainly, we all have times when we have to eat and run, but what about the rest of the time? Why should a meal on our own be uninspired or scarfed down as if consumed on the shoulder of an interstate highway? Why shouldn't the saying *la vie est trop courte pour boire du mauvais vin* — life is too short to drink bad wine — apply, even when we sip alone?

France has its share of fast-food chains. (McDonald's, *McDo* as it's known, is popular.) Still, the French have historically spent more time eating than the people of other nations



— more than two hours a day, according to a study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Even when time is of the essence, culinary innovators in cities like Paris offer modern twists on international street food and sandwiches with wholesome ingredients that make a quick bite still feel nourishing and laid-back. As the writer Alice B. Toklas put it, the French bring to the table “the same appreciation, respect, intelligence and lively interest that they have for the other arts, for painting, for literature and for the theatre.” This history of thoughtfully prepared meals and passion for *terroir*, the combination of earth and climate that distinguishes a wine, has made Paris an ideal place to practice the art of savoring.

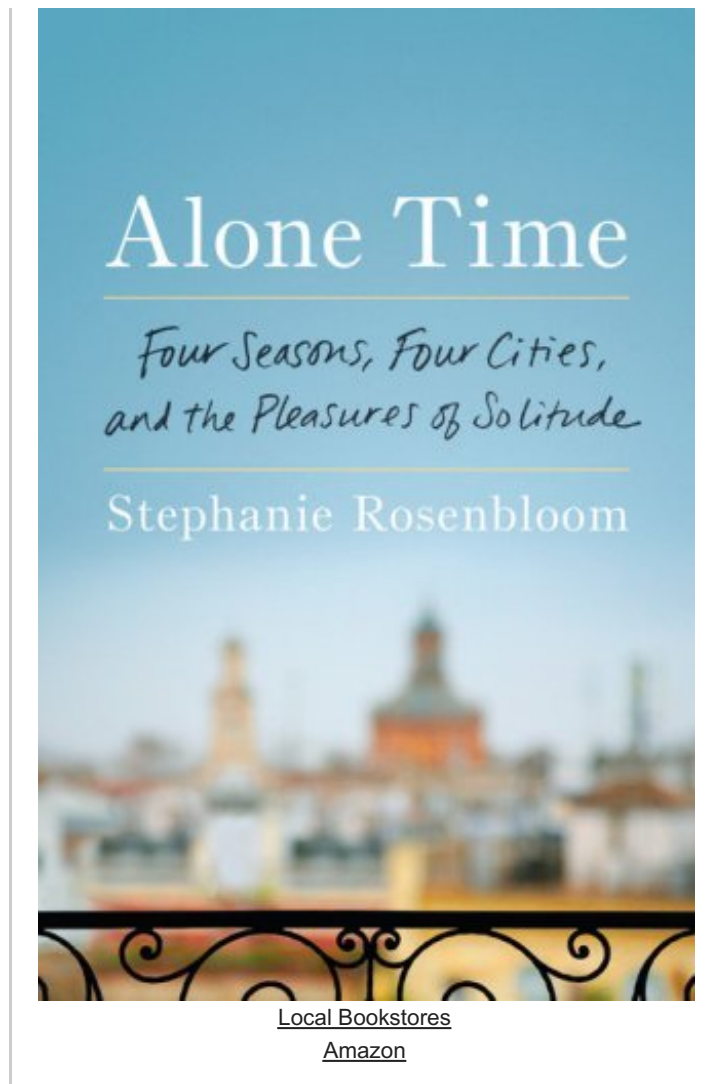
Eating alone, however, in Paris and beyond, has soured plenty of appetites. Nathaniel Hawthorne cherished his solitude — “It is so sweet

to be alone,” he wrote to his wife in 1844 while he was in Concord, Massachusetts — but not at mealtime. “I am ashamed to eat alone,” he noted in his diary. “It becomes the mere gratification of animal appetite . . . these solitary meals are the dimmest part of my present experience.”

Solo dining even prompted the pope to look for company. Vatican tradition had called for the pontiff to eat by himself. But in 1959, during Pope John XXIII’s first year as the spiritual ruler, the *Boston Daily Globe* published the headline: “He Shatters Tradition, Refuses to Dine Alone.” “I tried it for one week, and I was not comfortable,” the pontiff explained. “Then I searched through sacred scripture for something saying I had to eat alone. I found nothing, so I gave it up, and it’s much better now.”

Through the years, the only thing considered worse than eating alone has been eating alone in public. To borrow a term from the sociologist Erving Goffman, you’re a “single,” not a “with.” In public, a “with,” Goffman said, has more protection, choice, and freedom than a “single.”

When Steve Martin enters a bustling restaurant in the 1984 film *The Lonely Guy* and tells the captain, “I’m alone,” the captain replies, “Alone?” and the entire restaurant — the music, the clattering of cutlery, the blithe chatter — stops. Everyone turns and stares. After a prolonged



silence the captain finally says, “Follow me, sir,” and a cold spotlight appears on Martin, pursuing him to a table in the center of the crowd, which continues to gawk.

The supposed horror of solo dining was fresh as ever in the 2015 film *The Lobster*. In a world where humans who don't find mates are turned into animals, single people are gathered in a hotel ballroom and made to watch propaganda skits including one called “Man eats alone.” The man gets something caught in his throat, chokes, and dies. In a subsequent skit, “Man eats with woman,” the man again begins to choke — but this time there's a woman across the table who performs the Heimlich maneuver and saves his life. The audience applauds.

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Anxiety about how others perceive us is apparently so out-sized that a group of researchers devised a name for it, inspired by the table-for-one ordeal in *The Lonely Guy*: the Spotlight Effect. “People overestimate the extent to which their actions and appearance are noted by others,” Thomas D. Gilovich, a professor of psychology at Cornell University, and colleagues wrote in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. They reached that conclusion following a series of studies about appearance and behavior. For instance, in one study, subjects wore a shirt showing someone with whom they were happy to be associated, such as Bob Marley or Martin Luther King, Jr. In a different study, participants wore a shirt they felt had a potentially embarrassing image on it: a close-up of Barry Manilow's head. Setting aside the question of whether Mr. Manilow was unjustly categorized, researchers found that the participants in both studies allowed their own focus on the shirt to distort their predictions of how much attention it would garner. Similar results were found in a study involving subjects taking part in a group discussion: When evaluating their contributions to the discussion, they overestimated the prominence of their own statements to the rest of the group. “An ‘obvious’ social gaffe on a first date, an awkward stumble at the front of a line, or the misreading of a crucial passage of a prepared speech — each may seem shameful and unforgettable to us,” the researchers wrote, “but they often pass without notice by others.”

Does this same principle apply to dining solo?

Bella DePaulo, a social scientist and academic affiliate with the department of psychological and brain sciences at the University of California, Santa Barbara, had answers. To evaluate perceptions of solo diners she and colleagues at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville once had four twentysomethings (two men and two women) and four fortysomethings (two men and two women) visit a restaurant and be photographed. The pictures were then Photoshopped to create a variety of situations: Each participant was made to look as if he or she was dining alone, or with a person of the other sex, or with a person of the same sex. The researchers used Photoshop, instead of simply having the diners rearrange themselves in different scenarios, so that each person's facial expression and posture would remain the

same in each photo, regardless of whether that person appeared to be eating alone or with others. This was important, DePaulo explained, to ensure that the diners would not be judged differently because of shifting postures or expressions.

I'm shy, and while I was mildly concerned about what people might think of me when I began dining alone, I was more concerned about what *I* might think of me if I didn't try.

She and her colleagues then took the photos to an area shopping mall and asked hundreds of adults there to look at a particular person in one of the photos and tell them why they thought that person was out to dinner. If the photo featured someone dining solo, the researchers asked the shoppers why they thought the person was having dinner alone. Some of the respondents said things like, "He is lonely" and "She looks depressed." Others said positive, even wistful, things such as, "Enjoying a few good peaceful moments" and "He is secure."

When respondents observed the photos of the pairs, there were negative interpretations (the couple went to dinner "to have a talk because their relationship needs some mending" or they wanted to "get away from the children") and positive ones (the man was having "dinner with his wife for fun" and "they enjoy spending time together").

DePaulo, a leading researcher and author about single life, didn't publish the findings in a scientific journal. Why? Because what people thought of the solo diners proved to be no different than what they thought of the diners who had company, a null result as DePaulo called it, which she felt wouldn't be of interest to journals. Age, the number of diners, and whether they were of the same or opposite sex made no difference. "We never in a million years thought that we would not find any differences," she said.

"It's not that solo diners are never dissed," she explained. "But when people look at couples in restaurants, they're also saying equally dismissive things."

So why dismiss yourself?

A sidewalk brasserie like Comptoir Turenne is an easy place to begin. Anything goes; sneakers, T-shirts, pinstripe suits. You don't have to be escorted to a table. Pick one you like and take a seat. Café tables are small; you never feel as if someone is missing. Look around and you'll notice that others are also eating alone, taking the morning at their own pace.

Years ago, when I began dining out solo, I often ate fast food. The price was right, and I didn't fret about the court of public opinion in a McDonald's, where it's common for people to eat by themselves. (Besides, I happen to like McDonald's; you can learn a thing or two about a city by observing the goings-on there.) Yet that generally meant forgoing better nutrition and opportunities to experience homemade regional cuisine, hospitality, and ambience. And so I began eating alone at cheerful local places instead, often at brunch, lunch, or at around 6:30, before prime dinnertime. For my entire life I've been hungry for dinner at an hour people said was befitting octogenarians. Alone, I could be the eighty-year-old I always wanted to be.

Meal by meal, I began to try better restaurants. I made a point of learning how to ask, *Avez-vous une table pour une?* ("Do you have a table for one?"), which seemed to win points with

hosts and hostesses alike. Meals at museum restaurants were also an easy introduction. Today, a number of them offer food so good it's tempting to visit the museum just to dine there. (Le Frank at the Fondation Louis Vuitton is an example, where terrific contemporary French lunchtime fare can be had in a bright glass corner near a path through the Bois de Boulogne.) These lunches and early dinners are not only a genuine pleasure but are also practical: Ordering from lunch or all-day menus at nicer restaurants typically costs less. And eating earlier makes it easier to get a table at popular places whose evening time slots may be booked months in advance.

I'm shy, and while I was mildly concerned about what people might think of me when I began dining alone, I was more concerned about what *I* might think of me if I didn't try. I didn't want to be someone who experienced less of a city, less of life, because I was afraid. So I went.

By dining out, even at less than stellar places, I experienced more of whatever city I was in — practicing my terrible French on patient waiters and cashiers, sampling unfamiliar dishes, observing locals, figuring out where I was in relation to everything else. On rue de Turenne, for example, is the Saint-Claude bus stop, from which the hit song “Saint-Claude” by the French pop star Christine and the Queens gets its name. People step off the bus; lounge on the grass in the Place des Vosges; walk through the garden of the seventeenth-century Hôtel de Sully with its tidy box shrubs to the sound of birds and a nearby harpist. Beyond it are the gates of the oldest covered food market in Paris, the Marché des Enfants Rouges, where locals buy apricots and cheese, baguettes and butter, sunflowers and roses. Some stop by Le Traiteur Marocain, where a man with a couple of whisks tends to a pyramid of couscous; others stand in line for galettes and sandwiches that smell like heaven

To eat out alone is to partake of a city. And if you happen to be a woman dining alone, you may also be exercising a hard-won right, one that still doesn't exist everywhere. “It was impossible for a woman to go about alone,” Virginia Woolf wrote of Jane Austen in *A Room of One's Own*. “She never travelled; she never drove through London in an omnibus or had luncheon in a shop by herself.” Indeed, as late as the beginning of the twentieth century, New Yorkers were debating legislative bills about whether women should be allowed to eat out without a male escort. “I believe it is a protection to all decent women that women alone should not be allowed to eat in public restaurants,” said a member of the Women's Republican Club in 1908, according to the *New York Times*. Despite the objection, the club passed a resolution favoring a bill that would allow women to dine in public places without a man. Doing so, however, wasn't necessarily easy. As one restaurateur told the *Times* in 1964: If a “good-looking lady without a partner asks for a table, you wonder why she is alone and I've had my experience with that situation!” It wasn't uncommon for women alone to be presumed to be like the women in paintings by Van Gogh and Manet — prostitutes.

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Things weren't necessarily better in 1970. A *New York* magazine article that year began: "In this most liberal of cities, a woman has no legally guaranteed right to enter a restaurant." When Mother Courage, the country's first feminist restaurant (according to the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation), opened two years later, it provided a place for solo female diners to tuck in. "A woman coming to eat here alone knows she won't feel like a freak and won't get hassled by men," Dolores Alexander, who founded the restaurant with her partner, Jill Ward, told *People* magazine in 1975. Even today women are still reporting the same problems experienced by Alexander's generation.

Yet despite decades of unwanted attention and articles depicting eating alone as some frightful activity, women have long cherished a solitary meal. M.F.K. Fisher, who wasn't immune to feeling self-conscious when dining out by herself, could wax poetic about its pleasures. Fellow food writer Marion Cunningham, a champion of family mealtime, also appreciated solo dining: "Sometimes eating supper alone feels private, quiet, and blessedly liberating," she wrote in her popular *Supper Book*, where she devoted a page to "Supper Alone." There she briefly extolls the sorts of unconventional meals that can be enjoyed alone (she liked a baked potato with olive oil and coarse pepper and salt, followed by vanilla ice cream) as well as the opportunity to cook something restorative (for her, it was split pea soup). In 2017, the *New York Times* asked the humorist Fran Lebowitz which three writers she would invite to a literary dinner party. "None," she replied. "My idea of a great literary dinner party is Fran, eating alone, reading a book."

Now and then people decry reading at the table as "cheating," as if it's somehow not truly dining alone. Obviously we don't want to be mindlessly putting food into our mouths while focusing on our reading, but as anyone who has ever lingered over a meal knows, both are experiences that can be savored together. For those just beginning to travel solo or dine solo, a book is a terrific companion. And for those who simply love to read, alone time at the table may be their only opportunity to do so in the course of a day. I get pleasure just from watching others alone with their books, be it at Comptoir Turenne or KB CaféShop on Avenue Trudaine, where you can sit at a communal wood table or, as I did, on a stool facing the street in the open shopfront. Here, a man escorts his poodle past a newsstand. There, a handful of people with cameras and tripods arrive for a fashion shoot beside an unloved merry-go-round.

Once considered the purview of business travelers, dining solo has become a significant part of leisure travel, as well as of everyday life. In the United States reservations for parties of one grew by more than 60 percent in 2015 over the previous two years, according to OpenTable, the online restaurant reservations company. Solo dining has increased across Europe and in parts of Asia, too.

The atmosphere of cities is beginning to change as more people who live alone eat out and gravitate to solo-friendly concepts like "groceraunts" (in-store dining in places like Whole Foods and Cojean), Euromonitor International has found. At Ichiran, the Japanese ramen chain, solo diners can seat themselves in private "flavor concentration booths" with dividers and bamboo shades that separate them from the waiters, enabling guests to focus on the taste and smell of the food. "Our goal is for diners to understand and appreciate solo dining, dining

without speaking a word to the employees, dining just between you, yourself, and the food in front of you,” says Hana Isoda, Ichiran’s former director of marketing and business development, in a video for Zagat.com. Andy Warhol, who said he liked eating alone and wrote about wanting to start a restaurant chain where people could sit in booths and watch television, would have been tickled by the concept.

Today, some restaurants are aiming to attract solo diners by giving them the screen time Warhol craved, offering free wi-fi, charging outlets, and tablets for use during a meal, which is convenient for travelers who need to charge their phones or look up directions, though it’s not particularly conducive to savoring. On the other end of the spectrum is Eenmaal, a temporary restaurant that was opened by Marina van Goor in Amsterdam in 2013. Each table sat only one, and there was no wi-fi. Guests came alone, ate alone, and were encouraged to disconnect: read magazines and books, sketch, write, or simply enjoy the food and music. “At Enamel,” van Goor said in a talk for the lecture series CreativeMornings Amsterdam, “you are your own company.” Her words echoed those uttered more than two centuries ago by the composer Haydn, who once told a hotel waiter to serve him a dinner that some contended could have fed five. The waiter, according to the *Boston Daily Globe* in 1889, said, “But, sir, the company is not come.” Haydn replied: “Pooh! de gompany! I am de gompany!”

Paris is among the most appealing places to be your own company. It was there that the *New Yorker* food writer A.J. Liebling said he learned the art of eating. “I was often alone, but seldom lonely,” he wrote in *Between Meals*, his memoir of his days in Paris. “I enjoyed the newspapers and books that were my usual companions at the table.”

Under the red awnings of Comptoir Turenne, the men on either side of me — one in skinny jeans and baby-blue Converse sneakers; the other in a suit and tie — lit after-breakfast cigarettes. Tourists wandered by in the direction of the Picasso Museum, art galleries, and Merci, where shoppers line up in an industrial warehouse to buy necessities of modern life, like Bluetooth headsets, pink computer glasses, and soap made from tomato leaves.

To sit outside a Paris café at breakfast is to observe the city as it wipes the sleep from its eyes: the soft clink of a cup and saucer, the turning of newspaper pages, the passerby with a cigarette who asks for a light — and me at my little round table, nibbling a speculoos, sipping my café crème.

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*Stephanie Rosenbloom is the staff columnist for the Travel section of The New York Times, where she has been a reporter for various desks (including Styles, Business, and Real Estate) for more than a decade.*

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