

Solo dining on Long Island: How to break the stigma and enjoy eating out alone

 [newsday.com/lifestyle/restaurants/solo-dining-1.25663189](https://www.newsday.com/lifestyle/restaurants/solo-dining-1.25663189)

LifestyleRestaurants



Sabrina Schwartz, of Lindenhurst, dines solo with the VIP steak, creamed spinach and mashed potatoes at Blackstone Steakhouse in Melville. Photo Credit: Yvonne Albinowski

By Corin Hirsch corin.hirsch@newsday.com Updated January 9, 2019 2:00 PM

[Print](#)

Many of us have a primal experience burrowed deep into our memories: A tray in hand. A few nervous steps into the cafeteria. An agonizing decision: Whom do you sit with, or will you eat alone?

In a school lunchroom, sitting by yourself could feel like a terrible fate. As grown-ups, we think we've left it behind – but dining solo in a restaurant filled with couples, families and groups of friends can still feel like a stigma, at least to our inner seventh-grader.

Solitary adults have an option kids never did, though: eating at the bar. And growing ranks of solo diners are taking a seat there.

“There used to be a thing that it was depressing or something [to eat alone], but there's changing evidence that people are more by themselves, even if they're partnered up,” said chef Anita Lo, who researched the solo-eating trend before writing her 2018 cookbook, “Solo: A

Modern Cookbook for a Party of One.” While Lo’s book is focused on cooking, she had plenty of solo diners among the clientele at her longtime Manhattan restaurant, Annisa.

ADVERTISING

Statistics bear out Lo’s assertion. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ American Time Use Survey, which asked thousands of Americans about their daily habits, the numbers of people eating alone, at least part of the time, is creeping up – from 32 percent in 2003 to 35 percent in 2015. A 2014 study by the food industry-focused The Hartman Group found more startling numbers: That nearly half of all meals, 46 percent, are eaten alone.

At Anissa, Lo often would come out from the kitchen to talk to her solo regulars, who would likely be at the bar, where she prefers to eat when out alone, because “your service can be better and a little more immediate” than sitting at a table, she said, especially during peak times.

Sometimes bends in the road change people’s dining habits: A divorce, maybe, or moving to a new city, or working miles from home during the week. For me, sudden widowhood propelled me (at least for a few years) from a mostly at-home cook to a frequent solo diner, usually at a restaurant’s bar, where I could feel part of a larger scene while I ate, eavesdropped and observed and met the people around me.

Over time, dining alone at the bar became a habit I cherished – the entertainment never ends, and you can hyperfocus on your food – just as the ranks of solo diners swelled. At Blackstone Steakhouse, general manager Dodo Tecusan has seen solo dining spike during his 13 years at the restaurant, and the high number of offices in Melville means plenty of business people dropping in after work. “They come to the bar and befriend the bartenders, and have an ongoing relationship with each other. It’s like their living room,” said Tecusan.

Subscribe to the Feed Me newsletter

By clicking Sign up, you agree to our [privacy policy](#).

Tecusan said when time and space allow, the staff will gladly yield tables to single diners, but most opt for the bar over a table, anyway. “I think it’s awkward to sit at a table alone,” he said, not mincing words. At Off the Block Kitchen & Meats in Sayville, the cozy, 20-seat dining room means that the 25 or so solo diners a day are redirected to the counter/bar. “I really can’t afford to put one person at a table in such a small place,” said executive chef and owner Stephen Rizzo. However, the staff will treat you like quasi-royalty at the counter in front of the open kitchen, with an engrossing view of its smoky action.

Which highlights one cardinal rule of dining alone: Be sensitive to the size and busyness level of a restaurant when requesting a table for one. “I understand the real estate” that a table represents, said Lo, which is why she chooses to eat at the bar instead of at a table. “That being said, I would certainly sit at a table, but probably not linger.”

I've learned over many years, and hundreds of meals alone, that the bar can be a fine place to eat: You can watch the bartenders (or in Off the Block's case, the chefs) at work, you often can see some kind of drama unfolding, and you can soak in more attentive service.

There are pitfalls, for sure: The host or bartender who throws subtle shade at solo diners, especially women. If I sense this once, I never return, instead choosing places with staff who establish eye contact early and don't blink the proverbial eye at your solitariness. I find places where the bar experience mirrors that of a table, with elegant place settings and ample elbow room. Lastly, and perhaps more importantly, I gravitate to restaurant bars that exude the feeling of adventure, that anything might happen (excluding bar fights, of course).

"I love the food, I love the staff, and even though I'm going in alone, I never feel like I'm alone," said Joely Leidner, whose company, VLPlus Staffing, is just across the road from Blackstone Steakhouse. "I've made some great friends there."

French philosopher Jean Baudrillard once wrote "sadder than a beggar is the man who eats alone in public." Meh, as they say. I'm going with food writer M.F.K. Fisher, who wrote wiser words: "Human beings are happiest at table when they are very young, very much in love or very alone."

I tend to agree with Fisher's last point. Here are seven spots on Long Island where the solo dining magic happens — and the food and drink are on point.

BLACKBIRD KITCHEN & COCKTAILS

3026 Merrick Rd., Wantagh; 516-654-9200, blackbirdli.com

Even though Blackbird's comfy dining room sports plenty of tables for two, it's hard to miss the bar, a visual centerpiece of the room and the staging ground for bar manager Jonathan Gonzalez's superlative mixed drinks. The inventive victuals mean there is a shared sense of adventure and discovery among those sitting there, whether they're sipping a mezcal-and-mole-bitters old fashioned or tucking into chef Chris Perrotta's fresh pastas and game dishes, from gooey smoked Gouda bites to tagliatelle with shaved white truffles.

BLACKSTONE STEAKHOUSE

10 Pinelawn Rd., Melville; 631-271-7780, blackstonesteakhouse.com

Take a seat at Blackstone's handsome mahogany bar, and you likely won't feel alone for long. If bartender Vinny Fodera is working (you'll know him by his unforgettable mustache), he'll acknowledge you almost immediately, suss your needs when he's free and set about filling them — a drink, a menu, a well-timed joke. If you get lost in your phone, Fodera might strike up a conversation between you and your neighbor by deftly dropping an ice breaker between you. "He used to be a comedian by trade," notes general manager Dodo Tecusan.

Because the superlative steaks command high prices, Blackstone tends to attract an older business crowd, but it's a dedicated bunch. "I own restaurants, and I am a foodie, and I've been

to thousands of places, and [Blackstone] is second to none,” said Teddy Karagiannis, owner of Create eateries in Astoria, Queens, who eats alone at Blackstone several times a week. “I see newbies coming here, who come here solo for the first time, and they say, ‘Oh my God, what a great place,’ and they start coming again and again.”

SALUMI TAPAS & WINE BAR

5600 Merrick Rd., Massapequa; 516-620-0057, salumibarli.com

The bar hops late into the night at the osteria-like Salumi, where meat parts, whether cured or roasted or braised, and rotating wines are stock in trade (there are at least 20 by the glass). “Instead of going home and watching TV, I can be there, talking about various terroirs,” said Rick Wenthen, a mortgage banker who often works late and sometimes eats alone. Salumi sommelier Andrew Isaacson is always up for talking conditions for growing wine grapes, especially with the late-night diners who descend here. “It can be tough to find a high caliber of food after 10 or 11, and we draw crowds for that reason,” said Isaacson. The small-plate focus of the menu means you can experiment even when eating on your own, but those who prefer a more traditional, yet still convivial, experience can take a seat at the communal tables.

LOST AT SEA

888 W. Beech St., Long Beach; 516-632-5263

The name of this jewel box of a place is well chosen: You could almost pretend you’re adrift here, nestled into a ship’s hold that’s fully loaded with crudo, oysters and a trove of other seafood, with a supporting cast of unusual wines and spirits. The bar is tiny, about five seats, but it’s a lab and theater of sorts for owner-bartender Stephen Magliano, and you can watch him at work as you parse the menu. Magliano is happy to talk all things drink (or his peripatetic background, or Irish literature) as plates of raw and cooked fish arrive — Stallion oysters from the Great South Bay, a black sea-bass crudo dusted with scallions and chili, maybe roasted cod. Cash only, and there are ATMs at two adjoining businesses.

BILLIE’S 1890

304 E. Main St., Port Jefferson; 631-331-1890

This longtime Port Jefferson bar was closed for two years after a fire, but reopened in late 2018 as a spiffed-up public house with a lively locals scene and a succinct, smart and hearty menu. While the place might appear no-frills at first, the difference is in the details, from friendly barkeeps who will set you up well for a meal, cocktails in proper coupe glasses, well-curated (from prosaic to offbeat) comfort food done well, such as a drippy, behemoth burger wedged into an English muffin or melty ham and Gruyère croquettes. In a tourist-driven village, where a lot of the places reach high but fall short, Billie’s laid-back vibe is refreshing, and it’s a place where you’ll want to linger.

GATSBY’S LANDING

1362 Old Northern Blvd., Roslyn; 631-277-2318, gatsbyslanding.com

Befitting its name, this is the Daisy Buchanan of the list – 1920s Southern charm married to Northern polish, dim and sultry and impeccably designed, with the bar and high-top tables prearranged with settings to pull you in like a moth to a flame. Conversation with your neighbor can range from real estate to workouts as you nosh like royalty on fluke ceviche with avocado or robust squid-ink tonnarelli with blue crab, saffron and bottarga.

OFF THE BLOCK KITCHEN & MEATS

501 Montauk Hwy., Sayville; 631-573-6655, offtheblockmeats.com

The “bar” at this market and restaurant is really more of a counter, one fully exposed to an open kitchen, where chefs Grigore Radu and Tim Irwin do their loud, kinetic, smoky thing. A bar-counter seat is also hot real estate, and there may be a wait – so you can busy yourself with scanning Off the Block’s meat cases (you can order from these for your dinner) or fridges full of interesting beer, wine and cider, so you can choose that night’s pairing. Once seated, the action will unfold in front of you, whether it’s your dinner being spooned from an enormous pan of creamy carbonara-style ramen or the searing of a deeply aged rib-eye steak.

By Corin Hirsch corin.hirsch@newsday.com

Corin Hirsch is a Long Island native who covers food, drinks and restaurants for Newsday, which she joined in March 2017.