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## Americans are Eating Alone More and Planning Our Meals Less



by Sarah Jampel • May 13, 2016

10 Comments



The Hartman Group, a market research firm that focuses on the food and beverage industry, recently released an **infographic** titled "Changes in Eating Occasions: Erosion of Meal Rituals." (Sounds like scary stuff, right?)

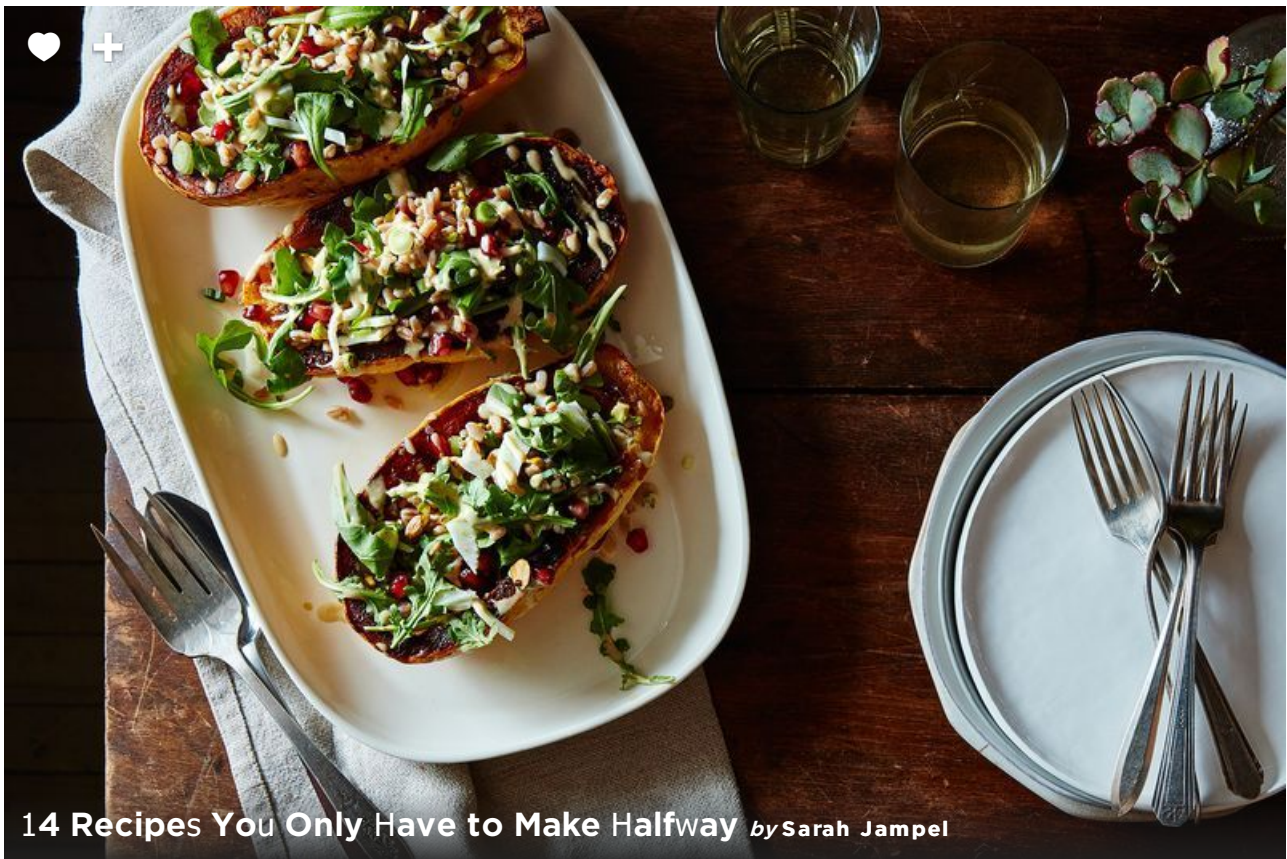
What does that mean exactly? The "breakdown in formal rituals of eating" equates to fewer communal meals planned in advance, cooked at home, and shared by everyone around the table.

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According to Hartman's data...

- Only 24% of dinners are made from scratch (though cooking shows are more popular than ever)
- 53% of dinners are planned within an hour of eating
- 42% of meals eaten are eaten alone (up from 38% in 2012)



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The statistics come from the group's proprietary Food & Beverage Occasions Compass database, which, according to the group's Senior Director of Marketing Blaine Becker, is nationally representative and consists of information from 35,000 adult respondents and over 63,000 eating and drinking occasions.

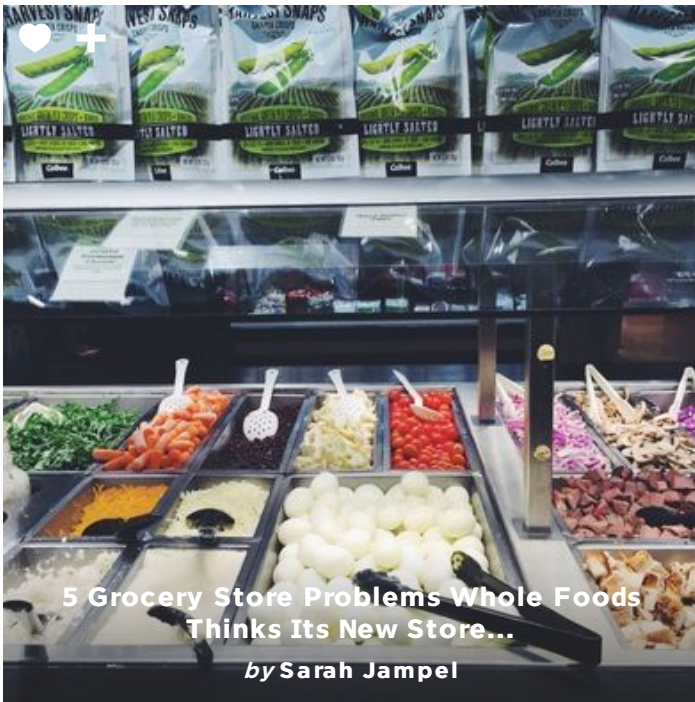
"The American dinner," the Hartman Group wrote, is

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*the perfect example of the erosion of food ritual. We are witnessing the entire pace of technology and social life swing to 'just in time,' 'last-minute' dinner planning that has caused labor-intensive meal production to be deprioritized.*

New models of grocery procurement, which are focused on convenience (like the new **365 by Whole Foods grocery stores** and the **ever-growing meal-kit delivery industry**) reinforce this data: We want quicker, easier ways to make dinner (and yes, we want those meals to be "fresher" and cheaper,

too).



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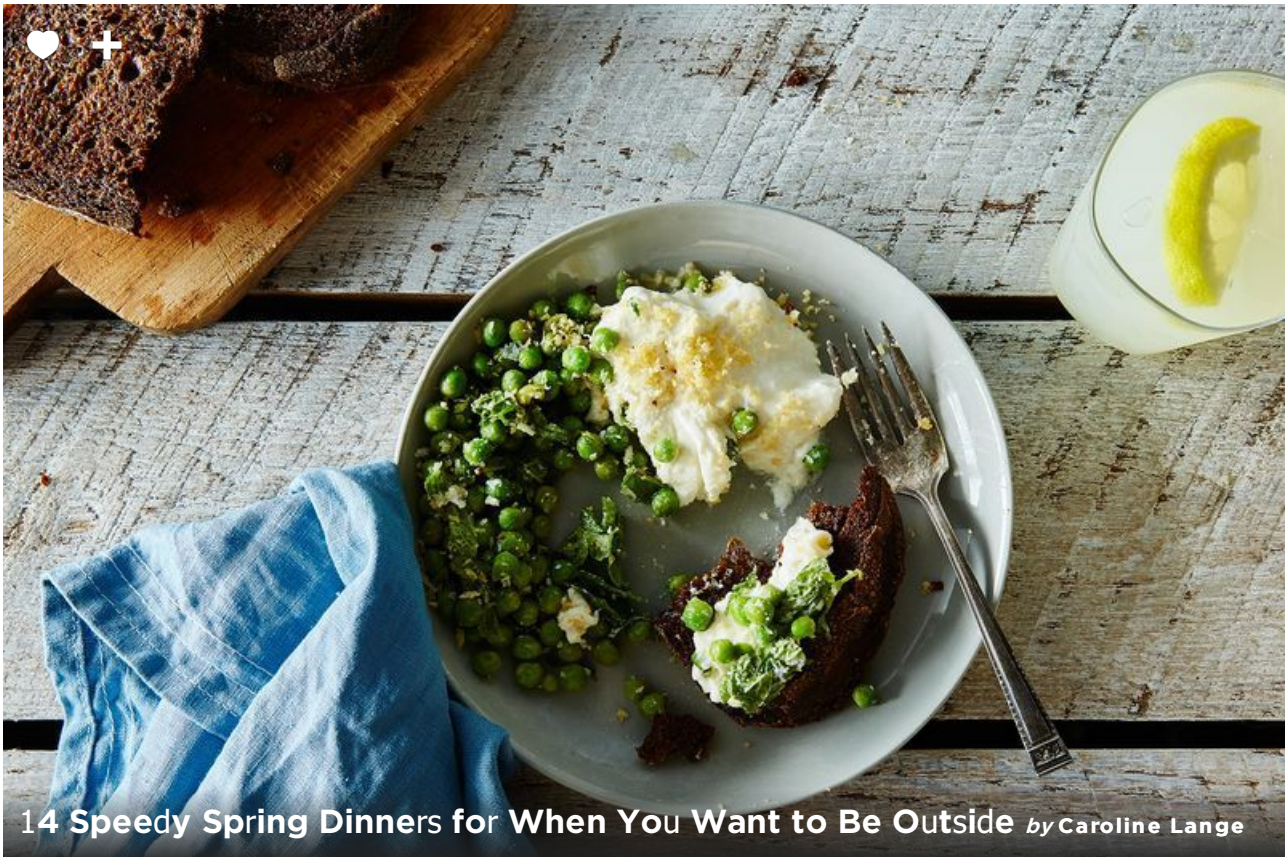
And some of the most popular articles and recipes on Food52 are also indicative of the trends that Hartman Group's data point to: When we collect **recipes that require no planning ahead** or that **provide opportunities for shortcuts**, it's almost surely popular. (Then again, our most impressive, most time-intensive recipes are popular too, as is entertaining content.)

The Hartman statistics suggest, according to the infographic, that consumers' priorities have shifted away from "shared food rituals at home" and towards "leisure activities and catering to individual food preferences."

But could it also be that sitting down to a homemade, pre-planned meal where everyone eats the same food is getting to be more challenging—especially in our post-1950s era, when one family member is no longer the designated meal-planner? And how about when you're a single parent who gets off work at 6 P.M.? In that case, 24% of dinners made "from scratch" (a term that the Hartman Group did not define) takes a great amount of effort.

A lot of romanticism surrounds the notion of a wholesome, communal, home-cooked meal (and there are **proven advantages to sitting down as a family for dinner**) but to cast judgment ignores some of the realities of getting food on the table. It's great to pull up a chair to a carefully executed meal, but someone has to do the work—and put in the time, and the money, and the labor—to get it there.

And in my opinion, if you can plan and execute dinner in under one hour (as 53% of meals are), more power to you!



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**Editors' Note:**

The original Hartman Group infographic stated that 74% of dinners are made within one hour or less but on May 16, the company issued a correction: 53% of dinners are made within these time constraints. The article has been updated to reflect these changes.

*Are these statistics true for you, too? Share how your own meals fit into this data in the comments below!*

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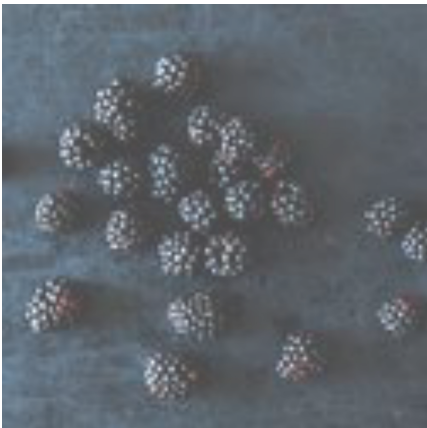


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**Sarah Jampel**

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A student of English, a lover of raisins, a user of comma splices. My spirit animal is an eggplant. I'm probably the person who picked all of the cookie dough out of the cookie dough ice cream. For that, I'm sorry.

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**Shortrib**

2 days ago

I work hard (!) to find recipes and compose meals I can make from scratch in 35-45 mins. Maybe if I didn't love food so much, or if my hubby didn't appreciate it, I wouldn't do it. But I hate to imagine a life without a yummy shared meal at the end of the day. Give me fast and delicious a la Nigel Slater and Jill Dupleix. It can be done!



**Zelda**

3 days ago

And it's not unusual in countries like Spain to have a late dinner, once all family members are home, activities out of the way.



**Zelda**

3 days ago

Something's got to give if parents work till late. We often ate (with kids) at 9, 10pm. They got used to it.



**Your Guardian Chef**

3 days ago

AntoniaJames, I really do follow you and check your comments. As you can see ! :-)



**Diari**

3 days ago

This is a very interesting topic that is somewhat bittersweet for me. My boyfriend and I live together and I cook our meals. I also work as a chef in a very busy fine dining restaurant which means looooooong nights. I'm not sure if it's my love for food or my love for my "man" that makes me feel super guilty when I'm unable to cook for us. Even though it's just us two, enjoying a meal at our table, together, feels right. Sometimes he sits across from me munching on something good and just smiles. Other times we sit side by side and I listen to him "mmmm" as he enjoys something special that I've made us. I'm not totally sure if I'm in love with our "family" meal or with him :) but there's something magical about eating with another person. It's a connection that transcends time...cavewomen and cavemen enjoying a sabertooth steak with the kiddies...that kind of nostalgia lol :)



**AntoniaJames**

4 days ago

AntoniaJames is a trusted source on Bread/Baking.

Well, I'm a bit of an evangelist for planning as a way to overcome the difficulty of putting a meal on the table at the end of a long work day (and mine are usually "long" and have been for 30+ years). I've added a lot of suggestions on that over the years here whenever the opportunity has presented itself. Given the really nasty criticism to which I've been subjected here lately when posting comments (always in the spirit of trying to be helpful) let me just mention this: I am aware of at least one very difficult divorce, involving kids of course, in which one of the parties (the husband) strongly believed that the marriage would not have come unglued had the wife (who did not work outside the home) cooked meals for the family to enjoy at home in the evening. She was one of those people who enjoys telling the world that she doesn't cook, but instead, "I make reservations" and occasionally orders carryout; the entire family almost never ate together. How sad. ;o)





**Diari**

3 days ago

Let me just say that when I see your name in the comments section I read every word. I love and respect your outlook on life and food (even if my own differs from yours) and hope that "nasty criticisms" don't deter you from commenting. You're appreciated :)



**Zelda**

3 days ago

"(the husband) strongly believed that the marriage would not have come unglued had the wife (who did not work outside the home) cooked meals for the family to enjoy at home in the evening. " Sounds a bit one sided to me. But, yes, sad.



**luvcookbooks**

3 days ago

Meg is a trusted home cook.

Missed some critical comments, AJ, but want to add that I love and appreciate your comments and recipes.



**Rachel**

3 days ago

antonia, i saw some of the criticism you mentioned but no need to qualify your statements and advice with that unfortunate fact. I enjoy reading your comments/advice and many others in the forum do too, so don't take the criticism to heart.



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