

TRENDS + NEWS

The Defining Dozen: 12 Ways the American Diet Has Changed in the Last 30 Years



Credit: Peter Frank Edwards



JULY 11, 2016 / WRITTEN BY SOPHIE EGAN



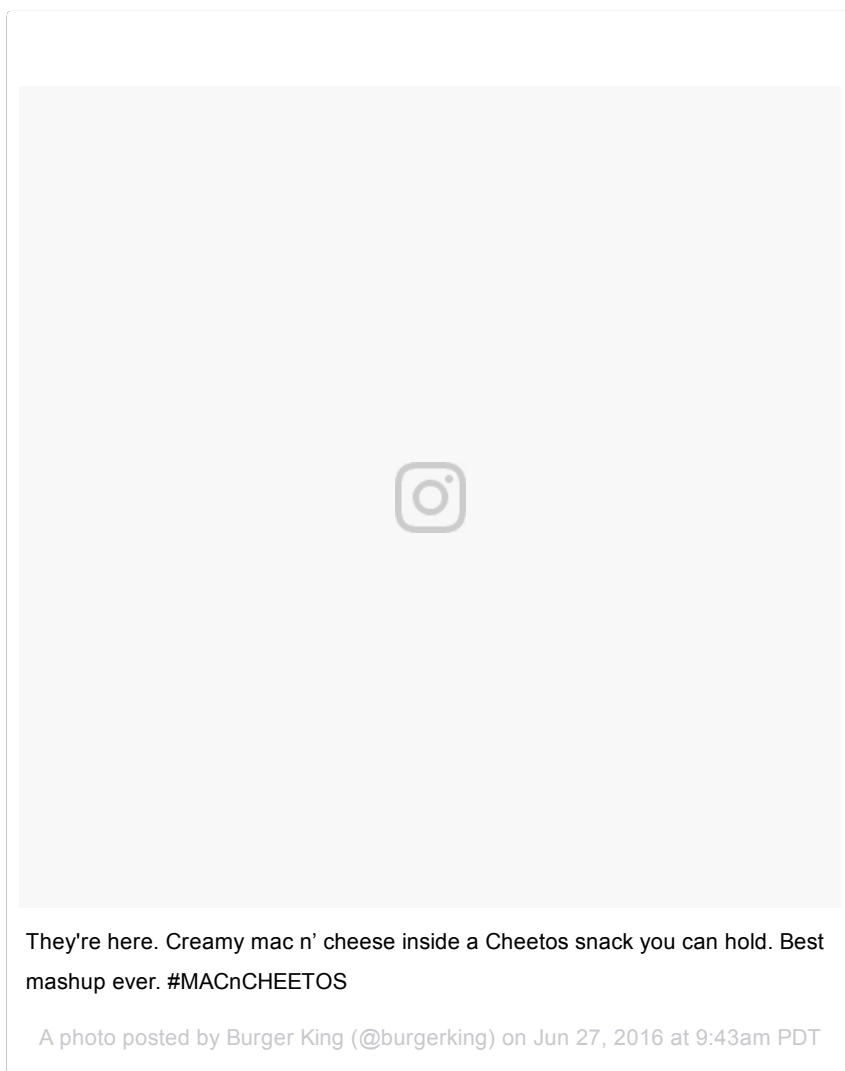
In her new book, [Devoured](#), author Sophie Egan takes readers deep into the American food psyche. Here, she reveals the most significant ways our national food culture has changed in the past 30 years—from KFC's *Double Down* and the launch of viral foods to the decline in cooking at home.

1. Snacking is now a normal, socially acceptable part of daily life. A snack used to be for kids, who were excused from having to wait until prescribed meal times to eat. They've got a lot on their plates with all the growing and the freeze tag. But today, the taboo has been lifted for adults too. Americans now work 200 more hours per year than they did in 1970. In 2008, a *USA Today* poll revealed that every year since 1987, Americans reported being busier than the year before. It's all about grabbing a bite on the run—say, a handful of trail mix from your desk drawer before the next meeting. Only [1 in 10 consumers does not snack multiple times a day](#), according to consumer insights firm The Hartman Group. Food marketers have aided and abetted the constant grazing by offering an ever-increasing array of portable foods, especially those that are one-handable. Take jerky, for example; [sales are up 46 percent since 2009](#). The dried meat market has exploded with [new flavors](#), packaging concepts, and artisan purveyors. Similarly, snack bars are one of the fastest-growing food items in the American diet in the last 30 years, market research firm NPD Group found. *Fortune* recently reported that there are now two thousand different combinations of fruit, nuts, grains, protein powders, and whatever else they put in there.

2. You're not a loner for eating alone. An increased number of single-

person households plays a part in more frequent solo dining, but so do smartphones. The Hartman Group found that 43 percent of Americans enjoy eating alone because it allows them to catch up on other activities. These might include watching TV, checking social media, or reading. When the occasion presents itself, chances are you're an eat-with-one-hand-scroll-with-the-other kind of eater. Technology has, in effect, enabled more solo eating just by making us feel less alone.

3. More and more, we aren't a nation that cooks. Last spring, for the first time since the Commerce Department started tracking American spending habits on food in 1992, we spent more money at restaurants and bars (nearly \$55 billion per year) than at grocery stores (over \$52 billion per year). The proportion of total spending on food away from home reached 50.1 percent in 2014, [edging out the proportion spent on at-home foods](#) for the first time, according to USDA data.



4. Social media drives new food experiences. Stunt foods—the genre of over-the-top mash-up “foods” ranging from Pizza Hut’s hot dog-wreathed pizza and Taco Bell’s neon orange Doritos Locos Tacos to the latest, [Mac n’ Cheetos from Burger King](#)—used to be reserved for the once-a-year state fair (think: fried butter). But now, fast food chains pump out cringe-

worthy concoctions on a regular basis. Whether it's the appeal of posting a selfie flaunting the latest iteration or the irresistible shock value of the headlines describing these items, they have become the ultimate clickbait, often going viral even before the item is on sale. ("OMG, can you even believe I'm going to eat this thing!?") The granddaddy of the stunt-foods movement, the KFC Double Down sandwich that uses two fried chicken fillets in place of bread, had Internet help out the gate. In its April 2010 press release, the chicken chain boasted that it would be donating "unnecessary" sandwich buns to food banks. Between the blogosphere brouhaha and YouTube videos—in which thousands of people watched other people go to test-market KFC locations and try the sandwich, bragging, "Bet you wish you lived here!"—the Double Down earned more buzz during testing than any other menu item in the company's history. When Taco Bell debuted the Doritos Locos Taco, it also launched a major media campaign featuring the "Live Más" tagline, even featuring the hashtag #DoritosLocosTacos on digital billboards in Times Square and on Sunset Boulevard.

5. Food is required office furniture. The whole lunch-at-work paradigm was revolutionized by the invention of the microwave and the desktop computer. Together, they turned white-collar workers into victims of early onset hunchback. As a result of longer hours, we've brought food into the workplace. Forty percent of us dine at our desks, participating in the national pastime known as multitasking. Others call it "[Sad Desk Lunch](#)." And have you ever noticed that office supply chain Staples has a candy section to rival that of most grocery stores?



Yep, [these shells](#) are gluten-free. Photo: Marcus Nilsson

6. A fixation on gluten-free has replaced a fixation on fat-free. We value foods for what they lack, as in, calories or fat. Or, gluten, the nutritional villain of the 2010s. The market for gluten-free products is estimated to reach \$15 billion by the end of 2016, according to research firm Mintel. Reduced-, low-, and non-fat foods became mainstays of the American diet as a result of nationwide alarm bells rung about fat causing heart disease. But, they hit their peak in the '90s. The consensus among nutritionists has shifted to emphasize that the type of fat matters most for health, rather than avoiding all fat, and consumers have been catching on.

7. Super Bowl Sunday is a national holiday. The annual dieting frenzy starts January 1, right? Wrong. It's actually the beginning of March. Sure, we might have a few false starts in January—a distinguishable uptick in dieting happens the first two weeks of the year compared with the final

two weeks of the year—but then, with the Super Bowl just around the corner, it all falls apart. Between the billion-plus chicken wings and swimming pools' worth of beer consumed, the [Super Bowl is now the second highest day of feasting](#) after Thanksgiving, according to the USDA. It's become our [last hurrah](#).

8. Customization is key. As evidenced by the 87,000 different drink combinations offered at Starbucks, we value individualism, and it shapes our eating habits. Rather than participate in a shared, communal meal, we expect to tailor each eating experience to our unique desires. The penchant for personalization has been heightened thanks in part to online ordering systems, mobile apps, and in-store kiosks that make it easier than ever to ditch the onion, double the mustard, or swap sweet potato fries for regular fries—whatever it takes to break the mold, be your own snowflake, and have a burger that meets all your peculiar needs.



Admit it, sometimes you brunch. Photo: Peter Frank Edwards at Milktooth in Indianapolis

9. For millions of Americans, “brunch” is synonymous with “weekend.”

If we are willing to admit that our Google searches are a reflection of who we are, then today [brunch is more popular than ever](#). While we spend most weekdays minimizing the effort to obtain and consume food—we spend the least time of any major developed country cooking in a given day, and the least time eating—brunch is the opposite. It's about slowing down and the pursuit of a meal. For many, brunch has become like secular church. As the antidote to our weekday eating habits, it is as much about not eating that yogurt or protein bar (alone, and on the go) as it is about the brunch itself. Despite the [countless brunch haters](#) in the food media world, the weekend ritual is here to stay. So grab a Bloody Mary and eat your damn omelet.

10. Values-based food purchasing is on the rise. We have always been concerned about how food affects our health, but today we want to know how it affects the [health of the planet](#), plus the well-being of the people who grew, harvested, and prepared it. Eating “ethically” in America can mean caring about everything from whether your waitress gets paid sick leave to the square footage of a chicken coop, from the carbon footprint of a sandwich to what type of fishing gear was used to catch your tuna.

11. Fast casual has taken over. From 1999 through 2014, the number of diners visiting fast-casual restaurants (i.e. Chipotle, Panera, Shake Shack, Blaze Pizza) grew at ten times the rate of traffic to fast-food restaurants. Convenience remains a priority, but now it's paired with greater

customization (build-your-own meals, assembly-line style), higher quality ingredients, and more upscale spaces in which to chow down.

12. More people are eating more types of global cuisines more often.

The silver lining of eating outside the home more is that Americans' palates have expanded: Two-thirds of us now eat a greater variety of cuisines from around the world than we did just five years ago, according to recent research from the National Restaurant Association. The top three cuisines are Italian, Mexican, and Chinese, which are also the top picks for takeout and delivery, but when staying to eat at a restaurant, favorites include sushi, Greek, and Southeast Asian cuisines.

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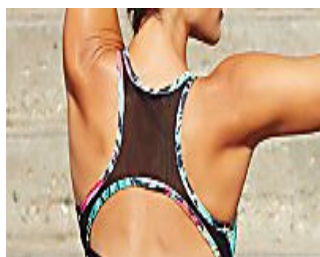
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