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How much do you eat out? Downtown Bellevue, Queen Anne households spend the most

Originally published August 26, 2016 at 10:01 am | Updated August 26, 2016 at 11:15 am





Toulouse Petit restaurant in Queen Anne. (Ken Lambert / The Seattle Times)

In downtown Bellevue, the average household spends more than \$4,200 per year on food at restaurants, cafes and other eating places. That pencils out to nearly half of total household food expenditures.

We complain a lot about how expensive Seattle has gotten these days, but there's one luxury people in this town don't seem ready to give up: Eating out.



Sure, we all know we could [save a bundle by staying in and cooking](#). The food is often [healthier](#), too. Even so, try showing up at any halfway popular restaurant without reservations — even on a weeknight — and see how long you'll have to wait.



But here's a surprise: As much as we Seattleites love dining out, it looks like we've met our match from across the lake.

In downtown Bellevue's gleaming condo and apartment towers, there must be a lot of nearly empty stainless steel refrigerators. Residents there spend a bigger

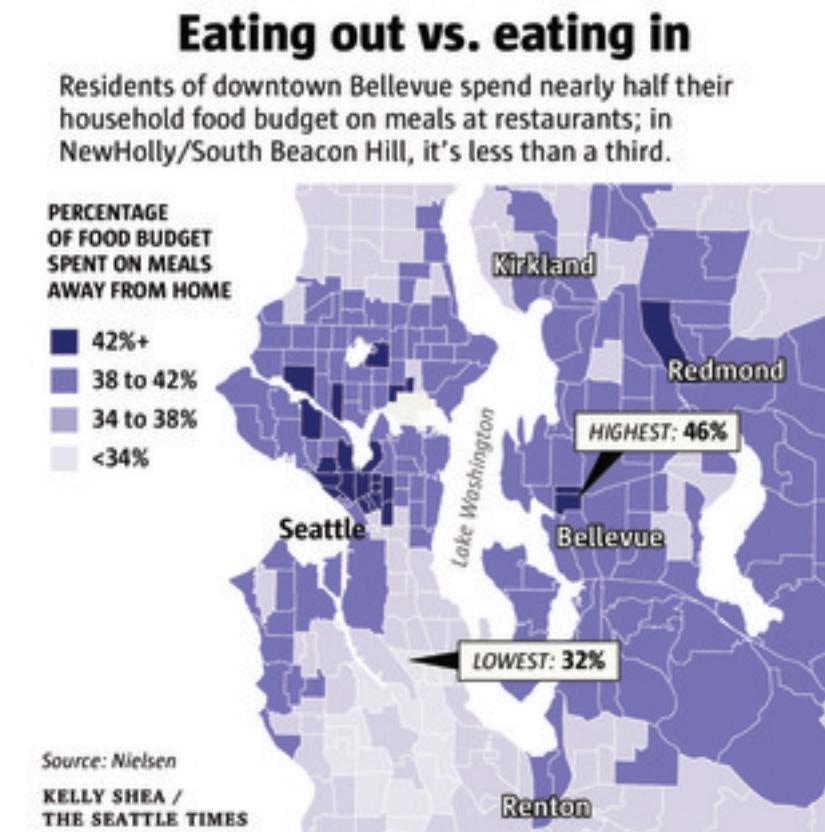
chunk of their food budget on eating out than anyone else in King County, according to data from Nielsen.

In the two census tracts that cover downtown Bellevue, the average household spends more than \$4,200 per year on food at restaurants, cafes and other eating places. That pencils out to nearly half of total household food expenditures — 46 percent, to be more precise.

Even so, downtown Bellevue only narrowly edges out parts of Seattle — particularly downtown, Capitol Hill and the University District — for the distinction of being the King County neighborhood where folks most dislike to cook.

At the other end of the spectrum, in the NewHolly/South Beacon Hill area of Seattle, households typically spend less than a third of their food budget on dining out.

It may seem logical, when you consider how expensive it gets to eat out, to conclude that affluent households would be more likely to favor restaurant dining over home cooking. To some degree that's true; downtown Bellevue, for example, is certainly a high-income



area.

But there are many exceptions. In a number of wealthier suburban areas, dining out makes up a relatively small share of household food spending. And some urban neighborhoods where incomes are lower, residents spend a large portion of their budget on food outside the home — these include some areas with lots of students, like the University District and the neighborhood surrounding Seattle University.

More than anything, it's a matter of lifestyle. Wherever you have a high concentration of single people, residents devote a lot more of their money to dining out.

It makes sense. People who live alone — [and Seattle has a lot of them](#) — often would rather not bother cooking just for themselves. So they might be more inclined to dine out with friends, pick up takeout on the way home, or simply go out to a restaurant alone.

“We know that eating alone is becoming more common,” said Laurie Demeritt, CEO of the Hartman Group, a food and beverage consulting firm based in Bellevue. “It’s not just because of the rise in single-person households, but also because we’re so time-stretched.”

People are increasingly comfortable going out to eat dinner alone, she says. It’s already commonplace for breakfast and lunch. And Demeritt points to a relatively new restaurant format known as “fast casual” — think Chipotle and Panera, or local chains

like MOD Pizza — as doing a good job of catering to the singleton market.

“All those people who are eating alone may not want to go to a sit-down, full-service restaurant, but they may not want fast food, either,” she said. “So the fast-casual channel has really been smart about targeting those smaller households with options that are maybe higher quality than fast food, but it’s not as weird to sit alone and eat in those places as in a sit-down restaurant.”

Fast-casual is growing more quickly than any other segment of the restaurant market, both in terms of new store openings and sales. Cafes — from chains like Starbucks to independent coffee shops — also have become increasingly popular spots for breakfast and snacks. Both types of eateries are disproportionately popular with millennial diners, Demeritt says.

While downtown Bellevue residents spend the biggest portion of their food budget on restaurant meals, they do not spend the most in terms of overall dollars on going out to eat. That distinction belongs to folks in north Queen Anne, where average annual household spending on dining out exceeds \$6,000.

That’s more than three times what the typical household spends on restaurants in King County’s neighborhood with the lowest restaurant budget: the Chinatown/International District.

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