

# The decline of breakfast, lunch and dinner

[Monica Watrous](#)

04.25.2018



Photo: Adobestock

MIAMI — Is dinner in danger? Consumption of America’s “main” meal has declined among millennials and Generation X, said Shelley Balanko, Ph.D., senior vice-president of Business Development at The Hartman Group.

Increased snacking and solo dining are among factors that have led to an erosion of traditional dining rituals, Dr. Balanko said during The Hartman Group’s Food Culture Forecast 2018 summit on April 19 in Miami.

“Meals today are different because they are no longer the anchors of our day,” she said. “There was a time in our history when mealtime was sacred and you built

everything else around it ... today we live in a different way ... meals are just kind of getting fit in wherever they can.”



Due to the demands of modern lifestyles, consumers no longer prioritize meal preparation. Despite the popularity of cooking shows and food blogs, only 28% of dinners are created from scratch, down 3 percentage points since 2012. Just over half of dinners are decided within an hour of eating.

“The upside of this for the industry is there is a lot of opportunity to help consumers with convenient items to cook from scratch,” Dr. Balanko said.

Meanwhile, 41% of adult meals are consumed alone, up 3 percentage points from 2012. This shift away from social eating may help accelerate the pace of food trends, Dr. Balanko said.

“As individuals, we can easily and much more quickly grab onto a new food trend, adopt it, reject it, move on to the next one, and so on and so forth,” she explained. “And so the pace with which trends will move through our food culture is going to hasten.”

Snacks are increasingly replacing meals, as snacking offers consumers an opportunity to personalize and experiment.



“Snacks really are a fun way for consumers to explore and discover new things because they represent a low stakes investment,” Dr. Balanko said. “For those of you out there who might be trying to connect with consumers in a more playful, fun way by providing new formats, flavors, textures, snacking is really the safe bet to do so.”

A staggering 91% of consumers snack multiple times throughout the day, she said. But snacking once was considered taboo. In the 19th century, snacks were associated with rowdy public entertainment and street people.

“Popcorn, peanuts even fruit were sold by vendors who actually also lived on the street, so there was this stigmatization that the food was dirty,” Dr. Balanko said. “Snacks were permissible to bring into the home when they became commercialized. So once you put that popcorn or those peanuts in a nice box or bag, then they were suitable. Consumers really embraced them.”

Snacks later evolved to become “expressions of American freedom” and a staple of entertaining “because you could eat as much as you wanted, where you wanted and in the fashion you wanted, very much like a picnic,” Dr. Balanko said.

Today, snacks pose a threat to the American meal, but perhaps more so to breakfast and lunch than dinner, she said.

“We think breakfast and lunch are more at risk of being snackified over time, but because of the social and emotional significance dinner still plays for many families ... we think it will survive and perhaps become more prioritized,” Dr. Balanko said. “Our research shows meals might be more on the decline, but we remain optimistic.”

"(Dinner) is our traditional mealtime ritual's last stand." — Shelley Balanko, Ph.D., The Hartman Group.

Dinner, she said, is “our traditional mealtime ritual’s last stand.” Weekend breakfast or brunch is another food routine Americans cherish. Brunch is more than twice as likely to occur at a restaurant, Dr. Balanko said.

“When it comes to food service, brunch and weekend breakfast is probably an opportunity,” she told attendees of the presentation. “For those of you in food manufacturing, if you’re playing in meal categories that can orient toward dinner, that’s great because that’s the one last stand, the one we’re really attached to. In other categories that can be more snackified, snacking is going to take on more of a role as far as future opportunities are concerned. For the retailers in the room, merchandising around the evening meal is important because if consumers are going to put it any effort it’s going to be for that meal.”