

# How to stop eating alone

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Despite having roommates, Queen St. W. resident Zenon Godzyk usually eats his meals alone. But on this Thursday evening, he's in the company of a dozen other diners who are collectively feasting on a three-course meal of jambalaya, roasted root vegetable soup and braised chicken thighs.

Godzyk comes here to the Stop, a community food centre at Lansdowne and Davenport Aves., once or twice a week to participate in its community kitchen programs. The drop-in group of participants this Thursday evening, who run the gamut of ages, backgrounds (Eritrean, Latin American, French) and abilities (former cooks, kitchen newbies) come together to prepare meals under the guidance of community kitchen leader Hussein Silva. Afterwards, they dive into the efforts by breaking the bread they just baked together.



Abdi Mohamed, left, and Pascal (no last name given) enjoy break at the Stop community food centre. (ZOE ALEXOPOULOS / The Toronto Star)

Godzyk prefers the company of community kitchen meals consumed at the Stop over his usual independent dining routine at home. "You take your time because you're talking with somebody," he says. "You're enjoying somebody's company and then you have more

time to enjoy the food.”



Antonio Logato enjoys the fruit of their collective labour and good conversation at the Stop's community kitchen. (ZOE ALEXOPOULOS/The Toronto Star)

Godzyk's solo eating experiences, when he's not at the Stop, are becoming increasingly common. The latest census data from 2016 shows that more Canadians are living alone, and likely dining alone, than ever before. One-person households account for 28.2 per cent of all households in Canada — the highest rate ever, while a 2013 study of American respondents showed that 47 per cent of eating occasions happen alone.

The latest Canada's Food Guide update reinforces the importance of eating with others. "When eating alone, it's more likely that you're going to 'gorge it down,' so to speak, or you're going to be experiencing distracted eating like eating in front of the TV or the computer or while driving," says registered dietitian Mosadi Brown. "With that, there's an increased risk of things like emotional eating and obesity for those that tend to not be mindful around food."



Placement student Emma Palumbo, right, helps community members prepare a multi-course meal at the Stop. The meals are a way to help isolated community members find opportunities to dine together. (ZOE ALEXOPOULOS/The Toronto Star)

For singleton diners, and especially seniors who are more prone to social isolation, Brown suggests seeking out community dining programs, like the Stop's community kitchen, or making the extra effort to reach out to friends and family nearby to share meals. The promotion of social dining experiences is seen elsewhere in the country with Edmonton's Hello, Let's Eat pilot project. Launched in 2018, the program promotes community meals through free rentals of food serving equipment and place settings for up to 24 diners.

Community dining experiences aren't common in the city. Outside of the Stop, Queen West's Theatre Centre, hosts monthly community lunches home-cooked by special guests and served for just \$5, sometimes accompanied by artistic programming such as movie screenings. But making meals a more social experience can be as simple as taking the time and connecting with coworkers at lunch, which 42 per cent of Canadians typically eat lunch alone from Monday to Friday, according to a President's Choice survey conducted in 2018.

"Oftentimes I'll recommend clients block lunches off in their schedule, just like they would a meeting, and setting that time aside to eat," says Brown. "Aim to do it during high traffic times when they know that other people will also be in the cafeteria or the lunch room."



Hussein Silva, centre, has been running the Stop's community kitchens since they began a decade ago. (ZOE ALEXOPOULOS/The Toronto Star)

Lunchtime is also the busiest hour at the Children's Storefront, a non-profit drop-in centre at Bloor St. W. and Shaw St. that has become a popular spot among neighbourhood parents and caregivers for its dining program: a healthy vegetarian lunch served from Tuesday to Friday, affordably priced at \$6 for an adult serving and \$3 for kids.

Chef Rosa Parsons prepares these meals in a city-certified kitchen in the basement of the Children's Storefront. On a recent Thursday, the lunch of the day was a fragrant coconut curry with vegetables and tofu, served on brown rice and accompanied by a simple salad of arugula, cucumber, tomatoes and roasted sweet potato. As the day's main offering is simmering, Parsons works ahead to roll out sheets of fresh pasta that will be served for a future lunch: an impressive effort for a \$6 meal.

Helen Foster and her one-year-old daughter, Emma, are regulars at the Children's Storefront. "A lot of the kids actually eat better and more when there are other kids at the table," says Foster. "When everyone else is sitting here together, it becomes an activity."



Florinda (no last name given) in the kitchen at the Stop, a community food centre at Lansdowne and Davenport Aves. that hosts community kitchens once or twice a week. (Zoe Alexopoulos/The Toronto Star)

Heather Ashmore sits across the table from Foster and her daughter, helping a two-year-old and three-year-old enjoy their lunches. As a caregiver, Ashmore used to work out of her clients' homes. "Nannying can be an isolating job," she says. But the neutral zone of the Children's Storefront gives her the opportunity to not only care for unrelated children as part of a nannyshare agreement, but it also allows her to socialize with other parents and caregivers.

As Ashmore's charges finish up their meals and head back to the play area, Children's Storefront director Roona Maloney helps to wipe down a high chair. Maloney, who has been with the centre since 2004, has witnessed how food has brought together parents, caregivers, and children alike. "Sitting down for a meal, you're engaged in the pleasure of having your tummy filled," Maloney says. "When you're relaxed, you share more. And I feel like that's almost always true at a kitchen table."