

Working Families Rely Heavily on "Convenience" Foods for Dinner, But Save Little Time

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Two-income families in Los Angeles don't live so much in a fast food nation as they do in a Hamburger Helper hamlet on the edge of a packaged lettuce greenbelt, according to the first academic study to track American families moment by moment as they make dinner.

"I really expected to see takeout used more often," said Margaret Beck, a researcher at UCLA's Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) and author of the study, which appears in the current issue of the peer-reviewed *British Food Journal*. "People actually spend quite a fair amount of time cooking, but they're incorporating a lot of so-called convenience foods. Some people are just grabbing food kits off store shelves and adding water."

The trusty hamburger augmentation product from Betty Crocker figured prominently in the meals of these working families, as did packaged convenience foods from big-box discount store Costco and Southern California-based specialty grocery chain Trader Joe's.

In connection with a larger study, CELf researchers videotaped four days in the home lives of 32 working families in Los Angeles, including their dinner routines, between early 2002 and 2005. Beck, an archaeologist who has studied cooking routines among traditional cultures today for clues to deciphering culinary remains found in Native American crockery and other artifacts, poured over the footage. She

noted whether families ate fast food, went to a restaurant, ate at someone else's house or cooked at home. When families ate at home, she tabulated how many dishes were takeout, how many were convenience foods and how many were made from scratch. She also tracked the number of dishes in each meal, the overall preparation time and the hands-on preparation time — time spent cutting, chopping, stirring, adding water, etc.

Of the 64 weeknight dinners Beck observed, 70 percent were completely home-cooked, meaning they were prepared at home, although not necessarily from scratch. Despite recent alarm bells about the rise of fast food and takeout — particularly the 2005 best-seller "Fast Food Nation" and the 2004 documentary "Super Size Me" — less than 15 percent of families ate dinners consisting solely of takeout or fast foods; only 5 percent combined takeout food with food prepared at home.

With almost all of the home-cooked meals, families served some sort of packaged convenience food. Frozen entrées (such as stir-fry mixes, potstickers, chicken dishes and barbecued ribs) were the most popular products, followed by vegetables (canned or frozen), specialty breads (ready-to-eat, parbaked or from mix), canned soup and commercial pasta sauce. Beck did not consider dried pasta and tortillas to be convenience foods, but she did count bagged salads and hot dogs.

Surprisingly, dinner didn't get on the table any faster in homes that favored convenience foods. Meals took an average of 52 minutes in total time to prepare. The difference in the total amount of time expended was not statistically significant between meals involving extensive use of convenience foods (with such foods making up 50 percent or more of a meal) and more limited use of such items (between 20 and 50 percent).

In fact, families saved only when it came to the amount of hands-on time spent preparing dishes — and the savings were relatively modest.

Families with an extensive reliance on convenience foods saved an average of 10 to 12 minutes over families with more limited reliance on such products. Home-cooked meals required an average of 34 minutes of hands-on time.

"People don't spend any less time overall on dinner when they use so-called convenience foods," Beck said. "Families seem to spend a certain amount of time cooking regardless. When commercial items are involved, they just ramp up how elaborate it gets."

Additional research is required to pinpoint the exact reason no time overall was saved with time-saving foods, but Beck thinks the pampered palettes of today's kids may play a role.

"Some people don't fight the fight of getting the kids to eat what's being served for dinner," she said. "The kids frequently got entirely separate entrees or separate items from the adults, so that adds to the overall complexity of the meal."

But the demands of serving as short-order cook only partially explained heavy reliance on commercially prepared foods. Other contributors seemed to include taste buds increasingly shaped by the food industry and dwindling reliance on grocery lists, Beck said.

"When you don't make a list, you don't know what ingredients may be called for," Beck said. "So you grab food kits off the shelf. Then you know you have everything you need."

Not surprisingly, mothers tended to wear the apron. Of observed dinners, 80 percent were made by mothers, and this was the case even when fathers were already home from work and theoretically available to pitch in.

"If you're a mom, expect to make all the dinners," said UCLA anthropologist Elinor Ochs, director of CELF. "A lot of the traditional gender roles are persisting."

To the distress of CELF researchers, children didn't help much either.

"It makes me sad when I think of people not having this experience," Ochs said. "You lose family and regional traditions."

Interestingly, families worked from cookbooks on only three occasions, and they never referred to food articles in newspapers or magazine while cooking.

"There was one woman relaxing and reading a food magazine, but this information didn't make it into the weekday dinner that night," Beck said. "Cooking from scratch is seen as a hobby. It has become this other realm of entertainment."

Source: UCLA

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