As eating alone becomes more widespread, people are raising their expectations for the meal. Photo: Getty Images

By
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Americans now eat nearly half of their meals alone—and they like it.

The growth of single-person households and hectic family schedules have made solo dining the new normal. For many consumers, eating alone has lost its stigma as sad and lonely. Instead, they want to relish a solo meal as much as they would any other—and they are ratcheting up their demands for taste, nutrition and convenience in meals-for-one.

“It’s really not that sad on a lot of those solo-eating occasions,” says Laurie Demeritt, chief executive of food consultancy Hartman Group. “A lot of people we talk to say, ‘I love eating alone because I can eat whatever I want.’”
Household challenges, like different schedules, account for the biggest reason people eat alone. But nearly one-third of people say they eat alone for personal pleasure, particularly millennial consumers, she says. Further eroding group dining: smaller, more frequent meals; the increasing acceptance of eating in the car or at a desk; the companionship of a smartphone and even the thrill of a moment's solitude.

In response, food companies are adjusting packaging, portions and bite sizes. “Traditional meal occasions are declining,” says Jen Bentz, senior vice president of insights and innovation for Tyson Foods. “Years ago, people used to schedule their lives around their meals—what we’re seeing now is that we eat around our schedules.”

How often do you dine solo? How do you feel about it? Join the conversation below.

At home, Americans ate 45% of all meals alone in the 12-month period ended in February, up from 42% in 2013, according to market-research firm NPD Group. Single diners eating at restaurants comprised 23% of all party sizes in the 12 months ended in February, up 1 percentage point over the year before.

At Kraft Heinz, research found that nearly half of all solo eaters say they enjoy dining that way, says Elizabeth Obbard, the company’s head of innovation. “They find it’s a way to catch up on other activities and have some alone time,” she says. “You’re wearing what you want to wear, eating exactly what you want to eat, and you don’t have to compromise for anybody.”

Ms. Obbard has been looking through Kraft Heinz’s cupboard of brands to determine how to best adapt them to solo eating. An early target: making cheesecake available in individual portions. “Cheesecake is delicious but if you’re alone you’re not going to make an entire one,” she says of Philadelphia’s cheesecake refrigerated snacks. Kraft Heinz has also been rolling out individual packages of Philadelphia dips with chips and pretzels in recent years. “It's not making the assumption that you're going to eat an entire [container of] dip and an entire bag of chips,” Ms. Obbard says.
Kraft Heinz has been rolling out individual packages of Philadelphia dips with chips in recent years. Photo: Kraft Heinz Company

Solo eaters want to keep meals simple and prefer little to no preparation, Ms. Obbard says. “There’s not a lot of motivations to cook for one,” she says. “They want simple, easy prep and they often want fewer components.” With that in mind, this summer Kraft Heinz introduced Fruitlove, a smoothie that includes three to six fruits and vegetables, plus yogurt. “You want your food to do more for you,” she says. “We included the fruits and vegetables so consumers don’t have to think about that.” Billing it as a smoothie that needs a spoon, rather than a straw, also makes it feel more satisfying, Ms. Obbard says. “Consumers don’t always want to drink their food,” she says.

Tyson Foods believes that solo diners prefer “flexible eating,” its term for eating smaller, more frequent meals that are easily portable. These consumers also seek out protein, since satiety is often the central goal of eating alone, Ms. Bentz says. “It’s a more functional eating occasion versus eating with others, which tends to be more social or emotional.”

Accommodating flexible eating is driving Tyson’s new foods. Last year, the company introduced Jimmy Dean Protein Packs, individual containers holding a peeled, hard-boiled egg, sausage pieces and cheese. The foods can be quickly grabbed and eaten in small bites, which fosters “rapid hand-to-mouth,” another requirement of flexible eating, Ms. Bentz says. Tyson’s Any’tizers chicken chips, launched this spring, are bite-sized chicken fritters shaped like triangular chips. The chicken chips are meant to be a more filling alternative to traditional potato chips, Ms. Bentz says. “Finally, you can eat chips for dinner,” Tyson’s website reads. “Take that, society.”
After studying how solo diners gravitated toward flavor-packed bowls of bite-sized food at restaurant chains, Conagra Brands rolled out frozen foods in bowls, including Healthy Choice's Power Bowls. Photo: Conagra Brands

For decades solo eaters heated up frozen TV dinners—metal trays with sections usually holding meat, vegetables, bread or a potato and a dessert. But after studying how solo diners gravitated toward flavor-packed bowls of bite-sized food at casual restaurant chains like Chipotle, researchers at Conagra Brands realized it was time for a shake-up in its frozen-food lines. In recent years the company rolled out frozen foods in bowls, including Healthy Choice's Power Bowls and Banquet's Mega Bowls. “It is more convenient eating—everything is mixed together and the flavors blend in a new way,” says Bob Nolan, Conagra's senior vice president of demand sciences. The food inside the bowls come “bite-ready,” giving solo eaters the mobility they want at home, he says. “Solo meals are with a fork only,” says Mr. Nolan. “A knife means sitting at a table, not on the couch.”

Conagra also wanted its frozen vegetables line, Birds Eye, to better accommodate eating alone. “Traditional Birds Eye vegetables are sides and very much multiple people being at the table,” says Mr. Nolan. This spring the company launched individual Birds Eye bowls that incorporate vegetables, like a zucchini lentil penne pasta with meatballs.
This spring Conagra launched individual Birds Eye bowls that incorporate vegetables. Photo: Conagra Brands

Joan Zimmerman of Charlotte, N.C., often orders vegetables when eating alone at restaurants because she finds cooking them at home too labor and time intensive. As a producer of trade shows, Ms. Zimmerman has spent her career eating alone during business travel and since her husband passed away three years ago, she often dines solo in her hometown restaurants, too.

After being frustrated by some local restaurants seating her at tables behind cash registers or near the bathroom—despite the dining room being nearly empty—Ms. Zimmerman now sticks to a handful of favorite eateries that welcome her patronage. “I get treated as a regular and I get a special table,” says Ms. Zimmerman. “I also leave a really good tip.”

When the service is good, Ms. Zimmerman says she enjoys dining alone. “I don’t pull out my phone and I don’t read,” she says. “I sit and enjoy the atmosphere, people watch and study the food.”

Queensyard, a restaurant in New York’s Hudson Yards shopping center, typically seats 10 to 15 solo diners per service, says former General Manager Anthony Battaglia. Hosts have been trained to sort solo diners into two groups: Those who want to interact with the staff and other guests and would be comfortable at the bar versus those who would rather be
alone in the lounge. “The guest that will sit in the lounge won’t ask any questions and almost ignore the host at the door;” he says. “The solo diner who wants to socialize will ask several random questions about the weather and about how they feel about the neighborhood.”

Once seated, servers are told to specially cater to solo guests because Queensyard, open since March, has found that singles have become valuable repeat customers. “They’re alone, they take more time to observe the team, the interaction we have with other guests, and the food,” Mr. Battaglia says. “We usually send a glass of bubbles or a little tasting plate.”

Write to Ellen Byron at ellen.byron@wsj.com

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