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## Why We Eat Together

Communal dining is a quintessential human experience.



*Family Portrait* by Gillis van Tilborgh

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**LOUISE O. FRESCO**

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Between us and our ancestors, who tore apart their half-raw, half-burnt meat with their teeth, or the women of Mesopotamia who ground flour to bake bread, food traditions have piled up and up. Food is no longer a

matter of survival, nor purely power; it confers the status and identity with which we distinguish ourselves from others and at the same time gives us the sense of community we seek. Those who eat as we do have a connection with us; they are as we are.

“Dinner’s ready!” is the traditional cry with which Western mothers used to call their playing children indoors and grab the attention of their newspaper-reading husbands. “Dinner’s ready!” We’re about to eat, so drop what you’re doing. The call represented the most important moment of the day, a confirmation of family life, of the caring role of the mother and the authority of the father. So it went on for many generations, in many countries.

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The table is a place of memory where we, whether because of the Proustian madeleine or not, become aware of who we are and with whom we are. Around the table, all previous meals come together in every meal, in an endless succession of memories and associations. The table is the place where the family gathers, the symbol of solidarity, or indeed the backdrop to family rows and childhood tragedies. At the table the eater is tamed. At the table we relive our youth through the recipes of the past, our hatred of endive or liver, teenage love through that first failed canard à l’orange, the sadness of the unarticulated apology, the tears of loneliness that mixed with the burnt cauliflower, the sensuality of fingers dipped in an airy sauce mousseline.

Eating around a table means both eating and talking, if only to say a few words of praise for what is presented to us. At the table we talk about what we’ve eaten before and what we’re going to eat and everything in between. If we say nothing at the table, then there is always the refusal of food as the

final word. With that same sensitive organ, the mouth, we taste and consume, speak and kiss.

How food is experienced has everything to do with the decor, with the rituals surrounding the meal, with the company, and with the experience. Everyone knows the trap of the Vinho Verde: that famous Portuguese wine tastes so much better when drunk in a sun-drenched restaurant garden than at home with central heating and a view of a rainy street. Simple wooden tables and farmyard cutlery appeal to our emotions, just like damask tablecloths and crystal wine glasses. Food is drama, the table the stage, and the cook is the tamer and hero. People eat more if the food is presented festively even if the taste is no different—important to remember if you are trying to encourage an elderly person to eat.

“Dinner’s ready!” calls people to a specific place. The dining table may be round or long, of wood or plastic, covered with a luxuriant cloth and monogrammed table napkins or with reed placemats that have seen better days. Sometimes the table is bare and shows traces of previous meals. On the top of my French farmhouse table, 200 years old, are diagonal scratches from the breadknife of an unknown cook. “Dinner’s ready!” is always a call to a specific place where the meal is being served, whether or not it includes a table: the picnic in the grass on a blanket, or on the open hatchback of a car beside the highway, or the rickety folding table on the balcony. Even in “[Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe](#),” that famous painting by Manet with a nude woman sitting on the grass, something that looks like a scrunched tablecloth lies next to the fruit. (Or could it be her dress, being used for the purpose?)

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The words “Dinner’s ready!” denote a state of mind determined by the

topography of the table. People sitting opposite each other inevitably pass dishes or pans, and are almost forced to look each other in the eye and to converse. People sitting next to each other look at a third person, or out of the window, or at a wall. Does that looking, or indeed not looking, make the exchange of confidences easier? Is the taste of the food influenced by the company and the seating arrangements? These dimensions are beautifully illustrated in Edward Hopper's painting "[Chop Suey](#)," in which two women sit opposite each other at an almost empty table in a Chinese restaurant in New York. The table is the center of a universe in which we seek our place, revolving like planets around the sun, drawn by the gravity of the regularity of eating and the longing for company.

At the table it's all about receiving food, or at least the ritual of serving and eating. Every meal arises from a series of specified acts, even if only an improvised picnic or a chocolate cake consumed alone. Something is revealed, from a dish, box, or picnic basket, steaming plates are brought in, pan lids are lifted, and vinegar and oil poured, there is stirring and slicing. Even where a lonely diner picks sweets out of a bag with bare fingers, a rudimentary ritual exists, a moment of pleasure, no matter how ambiguous or guilty. This symbolism of the meal applies to politics as well. The table is functional; formal dinners confirm the state of negotiations and at the same time demonstrate the power and opulence of those attending. Every meal, however simple, has a beginning and an end, marked by the unfolding of napkins and the deployment of cutlery, or by a prayer, a speech, or a toast, or a satisfied leaning back in the grass as the last glasses are emptied.

The human is the only animal species that surrounds its food with rituals and takes account of hunger among others who are not direct relatives. The table makes us human. Cooking is the basis for relationships. We distinguish ourselves from the animals not by our use of tools—the stick other primates use to extract honey from a honeycomb could with a bit of a stretch be called a "fork" or "spoon." No, we distinguish ourselves by the

fact that we eat at a table, or at least a specific place intended for a meal, such as a mat on the ground. We don't eat as soon as we get our hands on food, to stifle hunger; we usually eat together, if less than we used to and at more flexible times. We generally wait—although again less than we used to—until everyone has food on his or her plate, and we don't regard the meal as over until everyone has eaten enough. In urban families where older children remain at home and everyone goes their own way, people increasingly eat alone, or at any rate no longer with the whole family gathered at a specific time. The rhythm and communality of meals is declining in single-parent families too.

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The call “Dinner's ready!” was until recently a sign that a particular time had been reached, a specific part of the day, in harmony with the rhythm of the seasons, determined by cultural preferences: Is the midday meal most important or the evening meal? The sandwich at a quarter past twelve or the Spanish *el almuerzo* (lunch) at 3 in the afternoon? The call to the table marks the moment in the day at which everything else must give way to communality: Toy bears are abandoned, school textbooks closed, computers put on standby, and work stopped, at least for a while. In Western Europe there used to be three meals every day, but elsewhere too the meals determine the hour, even where breakfast consists of nothing more than the cold leftovers from the previous evening and lunch is carried out to workers in the fields, even where little remains to serve as an evening meal.

How far back does the dining table go? For much of the hundreds of thousands of years of human evolution we did not sit at tables at all. The Roman emperors lay on beds beside low tables, the poor of the Middle

Ages had little more than wooden troughs for their food, and in Africa and India people eat crouching down or in the lotus position on the ground. Estimates suggest that a quarter of the world's population doesn't eat at a table but around a mat, or standing in the mud of a market with a narrow plank for support. In poor countries, where mothers and children often eat separately from men, usually in or near the kitchen, the cry is not "Dinner's ready!" but "Come and eat!"—just as the usual greeting in many countries is "Have you eaten yet?" Why should we assume that dining at a table marks a high point in our evolution? Humans are not simply what they eat but how and where they eat. And with whom; in 18th-century Dutch a good friend was called a "table friend."

The dining table is disappearing. Fewer are being sold now in rich economies, apparently. This says a lot about the times we live in. The table is less and less the center of family life. We eat at the computer, standing in the kitchen, lounging on the sofa in front of the television, in the car, or walking along the street. Best of all we like to graze all day. If we do still eat at the table then it's no longer a dining table but one where eating shares space with other things, such as a computer, a television, or newspapers. Sales of plates are declining too, and even more so serving dishes and cutlery designed for serving from them. More and more of the food we buy is ready to eat, in throwaway tubs or trays, or designed as finger food to be eaten with one hand and no cutlery. What's the point of a table if we can devour a microwaved ready meal on our laps?

With the disappearance of the table as the center of existence, a new emotion is coming to the fore. The table exerted a certain discipline; now we feel conscience stricken because we eat too much, while neglecting to cook and forgetting how. Is the table not becoming the place of sin, of guilt about our desire to eat, now that we no longer dare to enjoy food uninhibitedly? Increasingly we eat alone, and what solitary diner bothers to lay the table?

Something comparable is happening to the kitchen. Avant-garde kitchens are becoming living spaces with a built-in library and bar, the ultimate thus far being Berloni's Not For Food kitchen in which a desk, sofa, and kitchen are fused into a single whole. Nostalgic farm kitchen or high-tech laboratory: the irony is that the more a kitchen is visible as a symbol of status and identity, the less it is used.

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*This article has been excerpted from Louise O. Fresco's [book](#), Hamburgers in Paradise: The Stories Behind the Food We Eat.*

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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