Contents

Summary
Chapter 1: Introduction
Trends and Themes Surrounding FAFH
Chapter 2: A Brief History of Food Away From Home in the United States
Colonial Era Through the 19th Century
Chapter 3: A Retrospective of Food-Away-From-Home Expenditures From 1987 to 2017
USDA's Food Expenditure Series
Chapter 4: Food Away From Home During the Great Recession
Data
Chapter 5: Demographics of Food-Away-From-Home Frequency
Data.57Age.58Race and Gender.59Socioeconomic Status: Income, Education, Employment, and Food Assistance Receipt.61Marital and Parental Status.64National School Lunch Program.66Discussion.67References.67Appendix: Tables.69

Contents—continued

Chapter 6: Evolution of the Food-Away-From-Home Industry:		
Recent and Emerging Trends	75	
Data		
Market Size and Structure From 2000 to 2015		
Food-Away-From-Home Sales		
References		
	93	
Chapter 7: Impacts on Nutrient Intakes From Increased Food-Away-From-Home	0.0	
Consumption	96	
Joanne Guthrie, Biing-Hwan Lin, and Travis A. Smith		
Data and Methods		
Rebounded		
Nutrient Differences Between FAH and FAFH		
Conclusion and Discussion.		
References	106	
Chapter 8: How Food Environment and Proximity to Restaurants Affect		
Nutritional Quality	109	
Ilya Rahkovsky, Young Jo, and Lisa Mancino		
Food Environments, Diet Quality, and Health	109	
Data	111	
Descriptive Statistics	112	
Demographic Characteristics	114	
Food Environment		
Diet Quality		
Rural-Urban Divide		
Conclusion		
References	122	
Chapter 9: What Role Does Food Away From Home Play in the Diets of Food		
Assistance Recipients?	125	
Charlotte Tuttle, Katherine Ralston, and Lisa Mancino		
Previous Related Research		
Data and Methodology	128	
2010 Healthy Eating Index Scores for Food Away From Home Versus Food at Home	129	
Households Without Children		
HEI-2010 for FAFH in Households With Children		
SNAP Households With Working Members		
The Relationship Between Nutrition Awareness and Attitudes and HEI		
HEI-2010 for FAFH at School Versus Other FAFH		
Conclusion		
References	140	

Contents—continued

Chapter 10: Menu Labeling	142
Hayden Stewart, Tobenna D. Anekwe, and Jeffrey Hyman	
Years of Debate Culminated in Passage of Menu-Labeling Regulations	143
Industry Behavior?	146
Conclusion	155
References	156
Glossary	160



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America's Eating Habits: Food Away From Home

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What Is the Issue?

Over the past several decades, Americans have grown to rely on the convenience of foods prepared outside of the home. Unfortunately, food away from home (FAFH) often contains fewer fruits and vegetables and have more calories, fat, and sodium than food prepared at home (FAH), and consuming FAFH is associated with obesity. Recently passed labeling legislation aims to help consumers make healthier FAFH choices and to encourage FAFH suppliers to produce more healthful options. To explore Americans' eating away from home behavior, this report presents research on three broad FAFH topics: (1) food choices and availability; (2) nutrition and diet quality; and (3) food policies, including menu labeling and food assistance programs.

What Did the Study Find?

Food choices and availability of FAFH. Over the past 30 years, FAFH's share of U.S. households' food budgets and total food spending grew steadily. FAFH options also became more widely available as growing numbers and types of businesses—including grocery stores—served prepared foods. Apart from the Great Recession (2007-09), these trends continued uninterrupted from 1987 to 2017, but the changes were not uniform across socioeconomic groups or business types.

- Spending on FAFH surpassed spending on FAH for the first time in 2010, increasing its share of total food spending from 44 percent (30 years prior) in 1987 to 50.2 percent in 2010.
- Higher income households spent more on FAFH and bought it more frequently than
 lower income households. Households with incomes greater than 300 percent of the
 Federal poverty guidelines obtained FAFH on 5.5 occasions per week, while households
 whose incomes were less than or equal to Federal poverty guidelines obtained FAFH on
 4.2 occasions per week.
- For households with an elderly individual (over 64 years old), the share of household food spending on FAFH was 8 percent lower than for other households. Also, Americans who were 35–44 years old consumed FAFH more often than other Americans.

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

- In 2000–15, quick-service restaurants (QSRs), also referred to as fast-food and limited-service restaurants, drove the industry's growth both in sales and number of outlets. The fastest-growing segment of the QSRs was fast casuals—e.g., Chipotle Mexican Grill and Panera Bread—which combines counter service with the perceived ambiance and product quality of full-service restaurants (FSRs).
- Much of the growth in foodservice establishments occurred in urban U.S. counties, consistent with patterns of urban and rural migration. As rural populations declined, FSRs in rural areas were particularly hard hit, leaving QSRs to dominate.
- Spending on FAFH declined during the Great Recession, by \$47 billion (18 percent) in real dollars from 2006 to 2010, and rebounded thereafter.
- During the Great Recession, households replaced spending at FSRs with unprepared foods purchased at retail stores (like grocery stores), but households' share of spending for QSRs stayed constant. In 2014, household expenditures on FAFH had yet to rebound to pre-Recession levels.
- Despite the downturn in household spending on FAFH during the Great Recession, the number of chain QSRs grew, and consumers spent a greater share of their FAFH dollars at these restaurants.

Nutritional composition and diet quality. The nutritional composition of FAFH across all income levels and all FAFH types (except school foods) was consistently lower quality and more caloric than that of FAH. Though FAFH is known to have lower diet quality, access to FAFH did not seem to affect FAFH consumption and did not correlate with diminished overall diet quality.

- FAFH's share of total average daily energy intake increased from 17 percent in 1977–78 to 34 percent in 2011–12, and consumption of QSR foods was the largest source of this growth.
- On the whole, FAFH contained more saturated fats and sodium, and less calcium, iron, and fiber than FAH—however, the nutritional composition of FAFH varied across outlet types. For example, in 2009–12, the fat content of school lunches (a type of FAFH) was almost identical to that of FAH (33 percent) while the fat content of QSR foods averaged 39 percent.
- Although frequent QSR customers purchased less vegetables, fish, and nuts, their overall diet quality was no worse than that of QSR nonconsumers.

Policies that affect FAFH. FAFH consumption is influenced by public policy mainly on two fronts. First, current food assistance programs with in-kind food benefits affect food choices and diet quality of participating low-income households. For example, new requirements that improve nutrition of school meals directly affect children's diet quality. Second, new menu labeling regulations may help consumers make more informed food choices at restaurants.

- The average household Healthy Eating Index (HEI-2010) for FAFH was lower than for FAH, regardless of SNAP participation or income.
- School meals provided by the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program contained higher levels of calcium than both FAH and other sources of FAFH and adhered better to USDA's *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* than other sources of FAFH.

How Was the Study Conducted?

This report uses a variety of data sources and techniques to examine FAFH trends. The analysis was done primarily using descriptive statistics (e.g., means, differences, and correlations) and literature review. The main data sources were the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), USDA ERS's Food Expenditure Series, the National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey (FoodAPS), the Consumer Expenditure Survey, U.S. Census Bureau's Monthly Retail Trade and Foodservices series, NPD ReCount, and Euromonitor Passport. These data sources include self-reported information and measurable individual characteristics collected by household survey, establishment information, and proprietary industry data.

Chapter 2: A Brief History of Food Away From Home in the United States⁸

Anne Effland

This chapter provides a historical overview of the growth in the food-away-from-home industry and the primary drivers of its growth in the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States. With the invention of automobiles, Americans became more mobile, and restaurant franchises grew to accommodate traveling Americans by offering low-cost, fast, and predictable food. In addition, increases in women's labor force participation spurred modern foodservice establishments to cater to families.

At the turn of the 20th century, the majority of Americans ate most of their meals at home, prepared from foods both grown at home and purchased from local stores. By the turn of the 21st century, the balance had shifted dramatically, with food eaten away from home rising to more than half of all food expenditures in the United States by 2014 (see chapter 3 for more details). Across the century, U.S. society changed in dramatic ways, transforming American eating habits. This brief historical essay surveys how the changing geography of work and urban life and changing attitudes toward family, children, and leisure time affected both food preferences and eating routines, moving a large share of U.S. eating away from the home and into a varied array of eating places and new foods.⁹

Colonial Era Through the 19th Century

Prior to the 20th century, many Americans—both rural and urban—ate away from home when they attended events like weddings, funerals, fairs, community socials, and shared work activities. However, attendees often brought food for these occasions from their homes or were fed with food prepared by other participants at the event. Eating food away from home that was prepared by and purchased from others began as an accommodation for travelers and transient workers, then developed with the rise of cities to serve resident workers and businesspeople. In the latter half of the 19th century, industrialization and urbanization spurred more rapid change. By the mid-20th century, the widespread adoption of the automobile, the increasing numbers of women working away from home,

Readers who would like to explore the subject further may also want to consult Richard J. S. Gutman, *American Diner: Then and Now* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Warren J. Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry, 1966-1988* (New York: Pantheon, 1989); Michael Karl Witzel, *The American Drive-In* (Osceola, WI: Motorbooks International, 1994); Jim Heimann, *Car Hops and Curb Service* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996); David Gerard Hogan, *Selling 'em by the Sack: White Castle and the Creation of American Food* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); and Richard Osborn, *The American and His Food* (2nd ed. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1941).

⁸Use of commercial and trade names does not imply approval or constitute endorsement by USDA.

⁹The narrative in this essay appears in similar form in nearly all sources consulted, making the use of standard parenthetical citations awkward with repetitive multiple references. This essay draws from two of the most frequently cited sources, Richard Pillsbury's *From Boarding House to Bistro: The American Restaurant Then and Now* (Cambridge, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1990) and John Mariani's *America Eats Out* (New York: Morrow, 1991). Other sources that support and supplement the history include John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Anne Cooper Funderberg, *Sundae Best: A History of Soda Fountains* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2002); Linda Civitello, *Cuisine and Culture* (3rd ed., Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011); Andrew Hurley, "From Hash House to Family Restaurant: The Transformation of the Diner and Post-World War II Consumer Culture," *Journal of American History* (Vol. 83, No. 4, 1997, pp. 1282-1308); Warren J. Belasco, "Toward a Culinary Common Denominator: The Rise of Howard Johnson's, 1925-1940," *Journal of American Culture* (Vol. 2, No. 3, 1979, pp. 503-518); and Michael Karl Witzel, *The American Diner* (Osceolo, WI: Motorbooks International, 1994).

higher disposable incomes, and expanded leisure time had launched the transformation of the food landscape into its modern form.

Taverns, inns, and boarding houses were the earliest places to provide food for purchase by travelers and transient workers. By most accounts, while the food was often passable, the need to eat away from home was tolerated as an inconvenience. For the wealthy traveler, early offerings were perhaps more sanitary and the setting more private, but not by much. Luxury accommodations for eating away from home improved in the 19th century as a growing population of wealthy industrialists and their families demanded well-appointed dining at hotels and on trains, steamboats, and ocean liners.

Taverns could also function as drinking houses for local populations, and boarding houses became common as housing for young, single industrial workers by the early 19th century. Coffee houses and oyster houses, which began as specialty eateries, quickly became (respectively, although not exclusively) gathering places for businesspeople and sources of cheap meals for workers in the cities along the eastern seaboard. For the wealthy, hotel restaurants like Delmonico's in New York and Antoine's in New Orleans became destinations for conspicuous consumption at evening events and family gatherings. By the mid-19th century, French cuisine, as well as specialty American restaurants and elegant hotel dining, had appeared in most major U.S. cities.

Changes over the mid- to late-19th century in urban and industrial work patterns necessitated new kinds of eating places. The larger geographic spread of cities could make it difficult for boarding-house lodgers, as well as those with families, to return home for mid-day meals, prompting a variety of businesses to serve these emerging needs. Around the same time, better paid office workers began to choose lodging *without* meals over boardinghouses, favoring the "European plan" in their rental arrangements and opting out of the meals traditionally included with rooms. As a result of both changes, a variety of restaurants grew up to serve this new clientele. Street vendors, lunch wagons, diners, soda fountains, luncheonettes, plate houses, lunch rooms, and cafeterias all appeared or expanded as places for working men, and eventually women, to get a quick, cheap meal.

The Turn of the 20th Century

Street vendors were among the earliest to provide meals to industrial shift workers who could not meet the meal schedules of their boardinghouses or the taverns and other eating houses that offered meals only at set times. Early street vendors, who carried baskets of sandwiches and other simple food items for sale, gave way to the lunch wagon, first devised in 1872 by Walter Scott, in Providence, Rhode Island. A horse-drawn wagon sheltered Scott from inclement weather and enabled him to serve customers continuously without returning home for more stock. By 1887, another innovator, Samuel Messer Jones, used a wagon large enough to accommodate customers who wanted to come inside and eat their meals. The rapid expansion of these mobile eateries led, in the early decades of the 20th century, to city ordinances controlling their hours of operation. In response, vendors began to park their wagons, cover the wheels, and hook up to utilities, inventing the diner. Originally constructed from surplus trolleys, streetcars, and railroad dining cars, massmanufactured diners came to epitomize this form of eating place by the 1920s.

Neighborhood restaurants that served fast, inexpensive meals to mostly white-collar workers—variously known as soda fountains, luncheonettes, and lunch rooms—began to appear after the Civil War in nearly every city. *Lunch rooms*, which developed from the "plate houses" and earlier taverns, functioned as a 19th–early 20th century version of the fast-food restaurant—simple,

inexpensive food served quickly. *Soda fountains*, which served soda water flavored with various syrups, became a popular addition to drug stores and candy stores, bringing in additional business and enabling customers to socialize on stools adjacent to the serving counters. By the 1880s, many soda fountains added light meals to their offerings, keeping their counters busy at times of day when sweets were less in demand and creating the *luncheonette*. As temperance took hold, soda fountains and luncheonettes substituted for saloons as social gathering places; in fact, during Prohibition in the 1930s, many saloons transformed themselves into soda fountains and luncheonettes.

Cafeterias with self-service dining offered yet another innovation in quick, inexpensive eating. The earliest cafeteria, the Exchange Buffet in New York, opened in 1885 offering men only a self-service restaurant that greatly increased speed for office workers in a hurry and reduced costs for the restaurant by eliminating the need for table service. The tray was introduced in 1898 at the Childs Brothers' lunch room in New York and transformed the cafeteria from a standup counter arrangement into a sit-down table form. In 1902, Joseph Horn and Frank Hardart opened a specialized version of the cafeteria in Philadelphia called the Automat, based on a German design, which allowed customers to choose food items from a wall of coin-operated windowed compartments. The Automat concept expanded successfully in Philadelphia and New York, but failed to take hold in other cities.

Many early cafeterias were operated by nonprofits in working-class neighborhoods and by factories and other large employers to serve their own workers. The style of service caught on particularly in Los Angeles in 1905, and cafeterias came to be known as "California-style restaurants" when they spread to other areas. They became particularly popular in the South, where restaurants were in short supply. Cafeterias opened in 1915 in Washington, DC, and expanded rapidly with the influx of office workers to staff an expanding Federal Government during the First World War.

As eating places changed, so did the food they served. Early boarding houses, restaurants, and lunch places offered hot, home-style meals mimicking those that workers would once have enjoyed in their homes. The changing workplace, far from residential areas and operating through multiple shifts to keep factories running all hours, transformed not just eating venues but offerings as well. Quick lunches from street vendors and lunch wagons (and later from lunch rooms and diners) demanded simpler foods like hotdogs and hamburgers that turned hot meat dishes into hand-held sandwiches. For breakfast, fried eggs, bacon, and pancakes could be easily prepared on the same grills as the lunchtime hamburgers.

New equipment and food processing methods—some originating as early as the 1890s, but many not widely adopted until the 1920s and 1930s—also contributed to the efficiency and appeal of restaurants. Homogenized milk, sliced bread, milk bottles, coffee percolators, bottle caps, refrigerators, automatic toasters, electric mixers, griddles, waffle irons, hotdog steamers, deep-fat fryers, slicing machines, stainless steel tableware/cookware, dishwashers, conveyor belts (to move dirty dishes to the dishwashers), the jukebox, Formica counters, and air conditioning all contributed to the ease of preparing and serving meals quickly and to the comfort and appeal of the new eating places.

The Changing Eating Culture

As the share of women in the national workforce rose from 15 percent in 1870 to 22 percent by 1930 (Jakle and Sculle, 1999, p. 95), urban eating options expanded to compensate for meals once eaten in homes where women were no longer available to cook. Luncheonettes and diners also expanded their

menus and improved their ambiance to appeal to women workers. At the same time, commercial eating places added booths and table service to accommodate children, and devised entertaining themes and children's menus to capture the rising disposable incomes that made family meals out a more common occurrence. Diners, luncheonettes, soda fountains, drive-ins, and other casual quick-serve restaurants became popular venues for meeting friends, dining with family, and celebrating events.

Despite the rapid development of restaurants in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, they remained a small part of the American eating landscape, mostly clustered in the business centers of industrialized cities. Then beginning in the 1930s and increasingly rapidly in the post-World War II years, the automobile became an integral part of American life. In the 1930s, 26 million automobiles and thousands of miles of new road enabled whole populations to be more footloose in search of work, community, and adventure. And all of these travelers needed to eat.

Roadside restaurants of various shapes and sizes and differing widely in quality and sophistication—many associated with gasoline filling stations and overnight lodging—grew up to meet the need for mobile dining. While many of the longlasting restaurant and fast-food chains began or expanded because of their roadside locations, most roadside restaurants (at least through the 1970s) remained individually owned or part of small, relatively local chains and served a wide range of foods, including breakfast; snacks like donuts and ice cream; sandwiches, including burgers and hotdogs; and ethnic/regional specialties.

Still, the expansion in numbers of restaurants in the latter half of the 20th century owed a great deal to the rise of chain restaurants—not just several restaurants with a single owner, which had been relatively common since the late 19th century, but restaurants linked by duplication of structure, theme, food, service, and amenities. Centralized sourcing of supplies, some food preparation, and building design streamlined management tasks and reduced costs, while controlling food processes to ensure a predictable quality of food and experience for customers (i.e., branding). As a result, entrepreneurs could expand their successful restaurant formats to regional and even national scale.

Chain restaurants, like so many other restaurant types, had their origins in the industrial changes of the 19th century. The Harvey House, a chain developed in towns along the Santa Fe railroad in the Southwest, was an early version of the travel-oriented chain restaurant. They became an icon of clean dining rooms, good food, and reliable service. Fred Harvey established—through practices like careful menu control, high-quality food (by travel standards), and spotless dining rooms—the foundations used by later restaurant chains like Howard Johnson's that traded on a perception of cleanliness, predictable food, and family friendliness.

The Rise of National Franchise Chain Restaurants

In the 1920s and 1930s, some of the most famous chain restaurants—Horn & Hardarts, Howard Johnson's, A&W Root Beer, Bob's Big Boy, Dairy Queen, White Castle, and Marriott Hot Shoppes among them—appeared in urban areas as walk-up lunch rooms, cafeterias, and hamburger stands. The earliest of these chains focused on urban working populations. However, as suburban expansion and leisure road travel began to increase around midcentury, most chains altered their designs to accommodate parking and drive-in services. New chains appeared specifically to lure automobile-based customers. And as chains moved into suburban settings, the notion of eating out for *fun* rather than as a worktime concession gained traction, fully exploiting the potential for increased sales that could come from turning eating out into entertainment.

The expansion in the 1950s of chains—spurred by the franchise model developed by Howard Johnson in the 1930s and used so successfully by McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Domino's, Long John Silver's, Burger King, and Sonic, among others—established the familiar national land-scape of easy-access, low-cost, quickly served, and predictable food. The franchise model was a variation on the earlier centralized chain system that solved the problem of effective central management across widely dispersed locations. Individual owners were licensed to operate local restaurants using the chain's common building design, food, and delivery theme under contracts that specified quality and consistency. Franchises facilitated operation at the larger regional and national scale made profitable by the increased mobility afforded by the automobile.¹⁰

The network of restaurants across the United States grew slowly into the 1960s, from 127,000 restaurants in 1954 to 135,000 in 1967, and then rapidly increased by more than 100 percent by the mid-1980s (Pillsbury, 1990, p. 103). Fast-food restaurants accounted for 40 percent of U.S. restaurants by 1983, and Americans ate out an average of 3-4 times a week, spending 40 percent of their food budgets on eating out (Mariani, 1991, p. 174). Breakfast food chains like IHOP, Perkins, Waffle House, and Dunkin' Donuts began to proliferate in the 1960s, first serving commuters and shift workers traveling to and from work but, like other chain restaurants, quickly adding families and teenagers in search of leisure activities. The addition of breakfast sandwiches at traditional lunch fast-food chains like Hardee's and McDonald's in the 1980s and at coffee chains like Starbucks in the 1990s added breakfast to the list of meals regularly eaten out.

Conclusion

Changes in the geography of work, the structure of the family, the availability of disposable income and leisure time, and personal mobility offered by cars and good roads have combined to alter what and where we eat. These kinds of developments will continue to affect our eating preferences, and the future will certainly bring more changes. Some new trends, such as internet ordering of fresh prepared meals for home delivery, rekindle older eating patterns like family meals at home. Just as surely, however, new forms of personal transportation, new techniques and technologies for food preparation, and new cuisines will take us in different directions, creating innovative ways to combine work, leisure, and eating.

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¹⁰See especially Jakle and Sculle, pp. 69-73, for a discussion of the rise of franchising in the restaurant industry.