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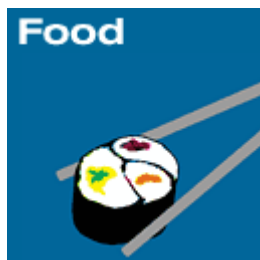
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## Ready, steady, eat!

Restaurants are now so efficient that it's hard to spin three courses out for more than an hour. Whatever happened to a meal being a big night out, asks Tim Hayward

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Wednesday January 23, 2008

[The Guardian](#)



French diners know how to take their time over a meal. Photograph: Owen Franken/Corbis

Do you remember how it used to feel leaving a good restaurant? The endorphin-induced glow of wellbeing, tightness about the waistband, the pleasing alcoholic buzz and a feeling of rightness with the world. That seems to be happening less and less these days. It's far more common to find ourselves back out on the pavement, 90 minutes after arrival, chillingly sober, wondering what to do next. Somehow a restaurant meal, an event that used to constitute an entire evening out, has passed through a kind of temporal compression. Eating out has become so fast and efficient that we need to plan another way to amuse ourselves for the rest of the evening.

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Don't get me wrong, this isn't going to be one of those tedious "Grumpy Old Man" rants about being told by some shrivel-lipped waitroid that "We'll need the table back by 10" - though God knows that's a reprehensible enough development. No, it wouldn't be right to blame the restaurants alone. This is a bigger problem.

It is partly a matter of evolution. Much of the image we have of eating out, many of the rituals and expectations, derive from the Victorian high point of grand dining. The notion of sitting in a dimly-lit public room and being brought food by uniformed servants began with aristocratic clubmen in side whiskers necking nine courses. Ever since, we've gradually whittled meals down. Soup, a separate fish course and the savoury (which came after pudding) have all been dismissed as unnecessary and unfashionable excesses.

Our alcoholic horizons have similarly diminished. Diners used to order a different wine for every course. That's not irresponsible use of alcohol; it's the traditional way to enjoy a meal. Today few restaurants are set up to provide a wide enough variety of wine by the glass and few customers or waiting staff have the skill to choose it. The modern way is to share a single bottle of general-purpose red or white.

Of course, no one except the most ridiculous retro food-fogey would actually advocate a return to the Victorian style of banqueting - it can be hell sourcing free-range swan - but it does seem that modernisation has tended to reduce the experience rather than enrich it. It has certainly streamlined the process.

The buzzword of the past few years has been tapas-style dining - tapas being a Spanish word meaning "a disorientating spread of side plates, presented to terminally indecisive urbanites with unpredictable tastes, diets and food allergies so they can still eat together". If the Spanish knew what we were doing with tapas they would laugh till they choked on their confitted elvers. In Spain, tapas come spread throughout a 10-hour evening, punctuating long draughts of complex sherries and passionate conversation; here they're dumped at the table all at once with an imprecation to "share" that sounds like an order to eat up and get out.

In part, the problem also lies with our own changing demands as customers. We don't necessarily want something heavy in an evening meal so we're cutting down. Many will plump for two starters or, if ordering a main, make starter and dessert an either/or option.

This has become such a trend that a recent story in the New York Times asked if the entree (main course) is in danger of becoming extinct. It seems that neurotic Manhattanites find the whole idea of the main course requires an uncomfortable level of commitment to a single dish - and, no, I'm not making this up.

At first glance, this doesn't seem so unreasonable. We don't want (and certainly don't need) to eat like Victorian plutocrats every time we go out. Often something light and fast - what the trade refers to as "dine'n'dash eating solutions" - hits the spot, and some restaurants have evolved to meet the need. A new breed of posh fast-food operations such as the nationwide chain Wagamama, and London's Busaba Eathai bring great innovative tastes when we don't have time to spare. In fact they can be quite blisteringly fast - on a recent visit to Thomasina Miers's hip Mexican street canteen Wahaca I was brilliantly fed, watered and hurled satisfied into the streets of Covent Garden in 23 minutes flat. All well and good, only don't make the mistake of going on a date there.

The customer trend for eating less and faster is beginning to undermine the mid-to-higher-range places where the majority of us go in search of an evening out. If customers enter an ordinary decent restaurant, with organised, efficient service and order two courses, it's almost impossible for the staff to spin things out for more than an hour. A friend and her boyfriend were bitterly disappointed after their plans for a special Saturday night out at the upmarket Brighton restaurant, the Strand, were thwarted when their three-course £50-per-head meal was over in a measly 40 minutes.

Some high-end establishments have really grasped the issue. Heston Blumenthal, who believes that eating is a multi-sensory experience, runs his tasting menu at the Fat Duck in Bray over several hours with all sorts of carefully planned tableside busking; though admittedly, as the bill could easily cover a weeks' rent and staff wages in a lesser restaurant, time- and cost-effectiveness may not be his biggest worry. Other restaurants also offer tasting menus, and some offer wines in small, two-glass carafes to encourage matching with the food, but this is only really happening at the expensive places such as Anthony Demetre's Arbutus in London's Soho, where they don't have to make a daily choice between turning tables and laying off staff.

In the past decade, our national attitude to food has evolved with confusing speed. We're really starting to get the hang of being a foodie nation. Our restaurants and our knowledge and appreciation of food approach that of the French, Spanish or Italians and we're closing fast. What we haven't yet developed is their knack of taking their time. Slow food isn't just a matter of taking years to rear and days to cook; it's also about taking hours to appreciate it. It's about taking our time to eat and about calm, unrushed and appropriate service.

This is a joint problem. Diners need to demand the right to take

their time, and restaurateurs with ambitions beyond mass catering should be falling over themselves to encourage slow eating. If we don't, we'll see the idea of "going out for dinner" lose its relevance. Going out for a meal will be about taking on nourishment on our way to the pub or the cinema, or worse, something we can't afford to do. We need to slow down and work out how we can turn a meal back into an event.

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