

Grab and Go

A Restless Nation Tanks Up

TUCKED IN A CORNER of a noisy corporate cafeteria near Boston, I am lunching with Regina Lewis, head of consumer insight for Dunkin' Brands, creators of Dunkin' Donuts, Baskin-Robbins ice cream, and Togo's sandwich chains. We forage from a multitiered bakery cart stacked with platters of cruller-shaped pastries, round quiche-like breakfast pizzas, and thin, crusty, grilled cheese sandwiches called "flats" that Lewis seems to adore—all inventions that are being beta-tested in selected stores. As she nibbles through several sandwiches, Lewis tells me what Americans want to eat these days. First of all, anything drippy, crumbly, or spillable is out, since so many people eat in their car and don't want to stain their clothes. "These are not pizzas where stuff is going to fall off everywhere and you're going to take a bite and half of it is going to be in your lap," says Lewis.¹ She is right. The quiche-like "Southwest-style" pizza that I am eating—its copious cheese embedded with flakes of green and red pepper and bits of corn—likely wouldn't break apart even if dropped from a considerable height. "Our R&D team has been able to devise pizzas that you can literally go like this with," claims Lewis. With a proud flourish, she gestures as if shaking a pizza upside down.

We need handheld, bite-size, and dripless food because we are eating on the run—all day long. Nearly half of Americans say they eat most meals away from home or on the go.² Forty percent of our food budgets are spent eating out, compared with a quarter in 1990.³ Twenty-five percent of restaurant meals are ordered from the car, up from 15 percent in 1988.⁴ Moreover, this mobile foraging, propelled by time droughts, constant accessibility to food, and relentless travel, is redefining the notion of a meal. Americans report that 20 percent of their "meals" aren't breakfast, lunch, or dinner.⁵ That's because snacking, generally frowned on a generation ago, is a norm, while meals tend to happen when and where we can fit them in. The two have converged, and we've become a nation of rampant "sn'eal-ers," or, if you prefer, devotees of the "mea-ck." For many, the day is one long graze. Lewis, who is single

and often goes for weeks at a time with nothing but water and milk in her apartment, recalls her shock when a man in a focus group described a late-afternoon snack of two McDonald's cheeseburgers. Lewis pressed him, "Wasn't that a meal, not a snack?" But he insisted it was just a snack. "Like, that was a snack!" marvels Lewis. She laughs often, perpetually amazed by today's eating habits, yet

Do we notice what's around us and what and where we eat, or do we hurry through our days and skim past once-sensual, sociable, ritual repasts? Do we grow detached from ourselves and from this earth when we turn gastronomy into a shrink-wrapped, bite-size, one-hundred-calorie chore?

simultaneously seems to hold herself back, guarded, ready to move on at a moment's notice. "The fuel that people use to get them through the day now is different. They don't seem to be satisfied with just a bag of potato chips or crackers." And cheeseburgers aside, Lewis empathizes with what she calls "perpetual lunchbag" living, the idea that food is a daylong endeavor that demands constant vigilance and strategizing. "When I go to our franchisee meetings now," Lewis relates breathlessly, "I've been in a car, I've run to catch a plane, they haven't served food on the plane, I'm running to get to the meeting and so often I'm thinking,



‘I hope there’s food there. I hope there’s food there,’ because I can’t eat when I like, even though I do carry food around with me.”

For thousands of years, humans have honed a skill called “optimal foraging,” i.e., using the least energy possible to extract the most food from their habitat.⁶ Now, we face a postmodern wrinkle: we’re foraging as often as not on unfamiliar ground. We’re perpetual tourists, grabbing and eating, searching and moving. Surfing, hot-desking, browsing, grazing: the very vocabulary of our daily lives denotes an adoration of motion. Hoteling, dashboard dining, travel-soccer—we increasingly shape our lives around portability of contacts, knowledge, entertainment, and nourishment, and this untethered, fluid, boundaryless life changes how we inhabit the world. Do we notice what’s around us and what and where we eat, or do we hurry through our days and skim past once-sensual, sociable, ritual repasts? Do we grow detached from ourselves and from this earth when we turn gastronomy into a shrink-wrapped, bite-size, one-hundred-calorie chore?

After my lunch with Lewis, I hop on an Acela train back to New York, riding south as the sun sets on the rails I traversed north that morning. Just for fun, I had deliberately told a sprinkling of people throughout the day—a cabbie, a security guard, a businessman on the train, a marketing manager—that I was traveling five hundred miles for a lunch date. No one was the least bit impressed. However

near or far they were journeying, they, too, were on the move and anesthetized to our wondrous conquering of distance. In New Haven, a bevy of women who had been attending a conference boards the train, toting neat red-gingham paper lunch boxes. One by one, they soon begin poking inside, picking at their sandwiches and chips as we hurtle into the dusk of another day.

We are an infamously mobile nation. That is one of the cornerstones of the American dream, and a root cause of our equally infamous stores of optimism. Our short history, immigrant roots, and pioneer spirit feed our yearning for novelty and freedom, along with our propensity for skin-deep loyalties. To be American is essentially to be from somewhere else. Robert Frost, the quintessential New England poet, was the California-born son of an Indiana “copperhead”—a Northerner sympathetic to the Confederate cause, notes historian George Pierson.⁷ Our hero-rebels are mobile: the roving Indian, roaming cowboy, fugitive slave, outlaw, and driver embracing the open road, as Sylvia Hilton and Cornelius van Minnen note in *Nation on the Move*.⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, just a month into his travels, concluded that one of the “distinctive traits” of Americans was their “restlessness.” Later, he elaborated: “in the United States, a man ... plants a garden and [rents] it just as the trees are coming into bearing; he brings a field into tillage and leaves other men to gather the crops; he embraces a profession and gives it up... Death at length

overtakes him, but it is before he is weary of his bootless chase of that complete felicity which forever escapes him.”⁹ Is the world just now acknowledging that we all inhabit, as R. Buckminster Fuller gleefully wrote, “spaceship earth”?

Today, however, we move ourselves, not our houses. We are bodily “shunted from place to place, just like other goods,” writes Nigel Thrift.¹⁰ We have one of the lowest rates of residential mobility in the postwar era. Just 14 percent of Americans move annually, down from 17 percent a decade earlier. But the average number of miles that Americans drive annually has increased 80 percent in the past twenty years.¹¹ “Long weeks in a single community are unusual; a full day within a single neighborhood is becoming rare,” writes Kenneth Gergen.¹² The local and global meld in a blur of trips—longer commutes, a vacation to Maui, business travel, a weekend flight to the Mall of America. Around the world, there are more than six hundred million international passenger arrivals each year, compared with twenty-five million in 1950. At any one time, three hundred thousand people are in flight above the United States. A half-million new hotel rooms



Above: Portability is a selling point: products with “go” on the label are on the rise globally.

COURTESY OF TO GO BRANDS, A RETAIL DIVISION OF BIOPHARMA SCIENTIFIC, INC.

are built each year globally.¹³ We can’t all be what Virgin Atlantic, in a silky paean to its best customers, dubs the “fast-moving, culture-shaping jetseter, who dwells in multiple worlds and time zones,” ever-hungry for the new, and at home in the placeless metropolis of the airport. But that’s no matter, because the *possibility* is there, and the yearning is deep. We have the tools of the trip—the cases of water in the DVD-equipped van, the gym clothes in the duffle bag, the charged gadgets, portable soundscapes, wheeled backpacks, satellite maps. “Observe the contents of a stranger’s briefcase,” writes Cullen Murphy. “In all likelihood, the owner could be transported unexpectedly to Alma Ata or Baku and yet still retain full access to money, power and freshness of breath.”¹⁴ And more than ever, our neo-nomadic movements connote liberation. The nomad has always been settled society’s alter ego. Now, our relentlessly restless mobility promises to deliver us from the fetters of the gray flannel suit and the tract

house. “Mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among coveted values,” observes Zygmunt Bauman.¹⁵ The bootless chase continues. Grab a bite and go.

Jaime Eshak swings onto a congested four-lane street in Boston, driving toward Harvard Square.¹⁶ She fishes around in an insulated lunch pack on her lap and digs up a sandwich she slapped together at home that morning: two slices of yellow American cheese on grocery-store whole wheat. She is also lugging a bottle of water, an apple, yogurt, and two granola bars, one a forgotten leftover morning snack and another for the afternoon. As she drives and chats, she absentmindedly takes a bite out of her sandwich. This is Eshak’s daily routine. Four days a week, she eats the same sandwich—cheese for now, following a long stint of peanut butter and jelly. On Fridays she treats herself to a tuna sandwich and a stick of string cheese from one of the seven 7-Eleven stores she supervises in the Boston area. Breakfast is grabbed and eaten as she readies her sixteen-month-old daughter for daycare. This morning: two waffles and coffee. “Syrup, no. Plate, no,” says Eshak, a tall, thin Midwest transplant. “I was running around the kitchen with a waffle in my hand.” For Eshak, eating rarely means taking a break or sitting down. Even dinners involve as little fuss as possible. Her husband, a car mechanic, will grill, or they’ll stop at a sandwich shop. Time is scarce, leaving Eshak on a constant, guilt-ridden quest to find “decent” food that fits into their busy lives. She tracks the fiber in her bread, the ingredients in her daughter’s organic baby food, the salt and sugar content of the many energy and granola bars that her family consumes. “My hobby is nutrition,” said Eshak, whose deep voice is equal parts brisk and friendly. But when there’s a choice, portability wins. “I’d rather be eating and moving and doing something productive.”

We are standing in a 7-Eleven store, her first stop of the day. Tucked on a busy urban street corner near the Cambridge city hall, the store caters to office workers, the city’s ubiquitous college crowd, and a sizable number of construction workers. As Eshak confers with the manager about new signs for a sandwich case, customers trickle in, buying cereal and instant ramen noodles, newspapers, and coffee. Almost everything edible in the store is made for eating on the run: single-serving cans of soup that can be heated in the store’s microwave, hot dogs, tube-shaped pizzas, and sixteen-, thirty-two-, and sixty-four-ounce Big Gulp sodas. Everywhere, portability is a selling point. A pack of two Milano cookies is labeled “On the Go!” A kit combining crackers, tuna fish, pickle relish, a breath mint, mixing spoon, napkin, and reduced calorie mayonnaise is, naturally, a “Lunch to Go.” In 2006, 1,347 products with

“go” on the label debuted on the global market, a nearly 50 percent increase from the previous year.¹⁷

Store manager Mekonnen Kebede, an Ethiopian who emigrated from Sudan at age sixteen, is amused by American eating habits.¹⁸ In the Africa of his youth, offices closed at midday and people went home or out for long lunches. He is standing next to a six-foot section, center stage in the store, devoted to nutrition, energy, granola, meal replacement, and other bars—a market that has experienced double-digit annual sales growth nationwide since the late 1990s.¹⁹ At this store alone, I count ninety-five different flavors and types of bars, from South Beach Diet to strawberry pomegranate. “Delicious Baked Goodness!” reads one label. “We’ve taken the memories of home-baked banana nut loaf and turned them into a convenient on-the-go snack.” (How much of my USDA daily recommended allowance of memories is in one serving?) Kebede walks over to a big refrigerator and yanks out a bottle of juice enriched with megadoses of protein and vitamins. “I have customers who drink this for lunch,” he says, holding up the bottle. “That’s lunch. That’s it.” He looks just as stunned as Eshak was when she heard that entire cities grind to a halt for a midday meal.

Food is fuel, and this is reflected in the look, feel, taste, and sensation of what we consume. Eating is not a moveable feast, nor even a picnic. Rather, foods are looking more and more like astronaut fare—concentrated, minimalized, single-serve. We buy crustless, frozen peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and dinner kits that come in their own bowls. (The side dish is going the way of the cloth napkin.) Just 47 percent of in-home meals include a “fresh” item, such as a vegetable, compared with 56 percent two decades ago.²⁰ Liquid meals, once the preserve of hospital patients, are in vogue. “Food is functional. It’s a bar you eat and you’ve got your meal,” says Kevin Elliott, vice president of merchandising at 7-Eleven, which is trying to transform itself from a mini-grocery where you pick up cigarettes and milk to a kind of gastronomic docking station.²¹ At his Dallas office, he keeps a small blender in which he makes a yogurt and protein powder shake each day for lunch. “I’m good to go for the day,” says Elliott, who also sees a big future in the stores for another of his new habits—doctoring bottles of water with protein and vitamin powders. “The consumer has a real need to start and to stop,” he tells me, stepping away from our telephone conversation for a moment to pay for a pizza delivery to his home. “They want to go, and they want to go fast, and when they want to shut down, they want to shut down quickly.”

The imagery is unmistakable. As market researcher Clotilde Rapaille explains, “The body is a machine and the job of food is to keep the machine running.”²² Pleasure in eating, writes Rapaille, “pales next to our need for movement. . . . We are a country on the go and we don’t have time to linger over our food.” Married mothers spend eight hours a week eating, an hour less than in 1965.²³ An American eating at McDonald’s typically zips through a meal in fourteen minutes, while a Frenchman at the Golden Arches dallies an average twenty-two minutes.²⁴ In 1970 Americans spent six billion dollars on fast food. By 2000, we were spending one hundred and ten billion annually—more than we spend on higher education, personal computers and software, new cars, movies, and most media.²⁵ And, often, eating is a brief and solitary act. For all our earnest intentions, dinner regularly entails “one or both parents grabbing something on the way home from a late night at the office, one kid pouring a bowl of cereal for herself, and another heating something in the microwave on his way out the door,” observes Rapaille, a French-born consultant with a doctorate in medical anthropology. “Americans say ‘I’m full’ at the end of a meal because . . . [their] mission has been to fill up their tanks; when they complete it, they announced that they’ve finished the task.”²⁶ With a mischievous Gallic jab at his adopted country, Rapaille can’t help noting the preponderance of food kingdoms sprouting within gas stations. (A gas station store used to be about seven hundred square feet. Now they are triple that size.²⁷) “When you drive up to the pump and tell the attendant to fill up your tank,” notes Rapaille, “it wouldn’t be entirely inappropriate for him to ask, ‘which one?’”

A quiet fill-up—that’s what people tell Regina Lewis they want. Nothing smelly, crackling, or noisy. Setting aside both cutlery and table, we prefer food that is handheld, super-scrubbed, packaged, and *unobtrusive*. This is sustenance with which we do not directly connect until it is halfway down our gullets. This is eating that takes a back seat to life—and is done solo. In the 1970s NASA hired the French-born industrial designer Raymond Loewy to help plan the living arrangements for the first space stations where astronauts would live for months at a time. To make the module homelike, Loewy suggested including a porthole, a space for private time, and a dinner table. American astronauts loved the view and the cubby but “hated” communal meals, writes environmental psychologist Jamie Horwitz.²⁸ They wanted to eat “on the run” and by themselves, while Europeans relished coming together to eat. One American space veteran suggested doing away with the table and installing automat-style

food dispensers. That way, astronauts could tank up whenever they liked.

What is the cost of our wondrous, liberating mobility, the price we pay for living untethered? Connection to place is replaced by inhabitation of space, bringing to near-culmination what Rosalind Williams describes as “humanity’s decision to *unbind* itself from the soil.”²⁹ The tempo of travel blurs the landscape, and our vehicles increasingly enfold us in a bubble of remove. “The sights, sounds, tastes, temperatures, and smells of the city and countryside are reduced to a two-dimensional view through the car windscreen, something prefigured by the railway journeys of the nineteenth century,” notes sociologist John Urry.³⁰ The portable soundscape of the Walkman-turned-iPod puts life at arm’s length, creating a “fragile world of certainty within a contingent world,” writes Michael Bull in *Sounding Out the City*.³¹ We are distancing ourselves from knowledge of our own bodily selves and our earth, as Bill McKibben observes. We live in an era when “vital knowledge that humans have always possessed about who we are and where we live seems beyond our reach,” he writes. “An unenlightenment.”³² Pause is increasingly absent in a temporal sense, too. A culture of constant movement, in part fueled by a love of instant gratification, cannot bear the mystery and unpredictability inherent in the idea of pause. “For the sake of speed, in the interest of not wasting time, we sacrifice the sensuous richness of the not-yet,” writes Noelle Oxenhandler.³³ We live in a culture of “becoming” but never arriving.

Gradually, the pre-modern world of competing and conflicting sights, odors, sounds, and tactile experiences gives way to an era of separate sensory experiences dominated by our most intellectual and distanced sense: vision, argues cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. As a result, “the perceived world expands,” while “its inchoate richness declines.”³⁴ From the cacophonous, slippery, odiferous, pungent eating of centuries ago, we have moved toward a gastronomy based less on sensory experience. We often literally don’t *notice* our food, although it is sometimes our last connection to the soil. When a recent government survey of daily activities neglected to take multitasking into account, the results showed that nearly 10 percent of Americans reported no daily time spent eating—because they were eating only as a secondary activity. And we like it that way: 32 percent of women and 22 percent of men would prefer to consume their food in pill form.³⁵ Many young people aren’t accruing “taste memories”—the remembrance of a just-picked tomato, a juicy summer peach, food researcher Carol Devine laments.³⁶ Surely,

they'll have memories of eating, although not exactly of real food, suggests Michael Pollan in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. With its enticing jolt of fat and salt, a chicken nugget, for example, is a "future vehicle of nostalgia—a madeleine in the making" for children of today. And yet, like all fast food, "the more you concentrate on how it tastes, the less like anything it tastes," writes Pollan.³⁷

All of this is no surprise to Brian Wansink, a mischievous Cornell professor who studies the psychology of indulgence. His myriad experiments show that as people pay less attention to what and how they eat, they are increasingly prey to marketers of abundance. In one experiment Wansink and his students rigged a soup bowl so it would never be empty. Unwitting subjects just kept eating until the experiment was halted. At the movies, while watching television, at restaurants and parties, people will lap up whatever Wansink serves, no matter how copious, stale, or bland. "I'm really interested in low-involvement decision-making," says Wansink, who also directs the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Center on Nutrition Policy and Promotion. "The real problem is that there are a lot of things we have in society that encourage detachment."³⁸

Wansink himself is an omnivore's omnivore, gulping coffee one minute, popping a handful of M&M's or a stick of green-apple gum into his mouth the next. A perpetual-motion workaholic, he nevertheless sits down to dinner nightly with his Taiwanese wife, toddler, and, on the day I am there, his elderly parents, visiting from Iowa. Having grown up in a close-knit farm family, Wansink has always been fascinated by the role that food can play in creating a cohesive society, and he refuses to take part in the ideological battles pitting food snobs against mainstream America. The answer to better eating, he believes, lies in getting people to open their eyes and awaken their senses to the grotesque portions scarfed down distractedly and the tastelessness of processed food. Once, early in his career, he got an obese man to break his addiction to drive-thru eating by persuading him to stop by the side of the road to eat. The man realized that the food simply tasted awful.

Dinner kits and power bars. Perpetual lunchbags and quiet fill-ups. Can we stop now? Can we pull to the side of the road and look hard at the encroachment of placeless places, or are we too enamored of our untrammelled solo journeys, the possibility of yet another choice around the corner? It's not too late. If we pause, we can begin to see a topography of detachment. In endeavoring to hustle past the limitations of the clock, we are losing our anchoring and hence our sense of self in a blurred life broken from place. In believing that we are shedding our biological limi-

tations, we are losing our last connections to the earthly and to the sensual. "What is needed is a new emphasis on the real, palpable, enfleshed materiality of our surroundings," asserts cultural historian Marina Warner.³⁹ What is needed is a way to recover the arts of pausing, sensing, tasting, of sharing a meal. Full stop.

At dinner, Wansink eats slowly, taking several small helpings of his wife's sautéed chicken, tomatoes, and fresh basil, and his mother's chopped bacon and broccoli salad. He slips his one-year-old a chickpea, prompting a scolding from his wife about choking. The meal is leisurely, punctuated with tidbits from their day and stories from Wansink's childhood. Then the table is cleared and his wife brings out Chinese sweets to celebrate the October harvest festival and the legend of the lady banished to live on the moon for her sins. There are tiny bits of dried mango, coffee-flavored dried plums, and little almond cakes shaped like a full moon. Wansink puts a tiny morsel of cake on his daughter's highchair tray, and she eagerly pops it into her mouth, making such a joyful gurgle that everyone at the table can't help laughing. The unhurried moment hangs in the air, round and sweet as a moon cake. ☺

Adapted from *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Prometheus, 2008).

NOTES

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