



Story Rebecca Huntley

table manners

Once upon a time, there were dining tables. Whole families sat around them ... and Mum had all the time in the world to cook.

"What I'd like is to remind families to have a little cook-up and sit round the table regularly. It might sound a bit patronising, but it's not meant to be ... I think if you got everyone to eat round the table two or three times a week you'd get a drop in the divorce rate."

— celebrity chef Jamie Oliver

Mount Cotton is about 40 minutes' drive from the centre of Brisbane, and the taxi driver seems mighty pleased to get the fare. I'd been told the south-eastern locality and its surrounds used to be full of market gardens; now from the cab window I see that the growing Brisbane suburbs have mostly pushed them out. It's now all largeish houses on larger blocks,

with mere hints of its semi-rural past: a homemade ad for fresh eggs, a winery open on the weekends.

Joanna is in the middle of moving and she apologises for the chaos. The doors to her generously proportioned modern home are open, even on this chilly night. Cats and children come and go. With her neighbour Carla, we sit at a round table with tea and some slivers of store-bought chocolate cake. Joanna is sorry she couldn't provide anything home-baked.

She describes herself as "divorced with three kids". Her ex lives in the same suburb. Her 14-year-old daughter lives with Dad, the youngest son, 12, with her, and the eldest, a 16-year-old boy, bounces back and forth between the two. Joanna works three days a week in a produce shop doing data entry. Carla — perkier, a fast talker with a sleek black bob —

is married with two daughters of 17 and 13; she has been a teacher but is now employed part-time doing office administration.

Although both women work part-time and have kids of similar ages, they have very different approaches to family meals. Carla is the menu planner, the "fusspot" who only shops once a week. "I tend not to be a packet person. I like to cook from scratch," she says. Although she is a supermarket shopper, she goes out of her way to visit particular stores for special ingredients — organic ham, fresh nuts and so forth.

Joanna is more of a "meat and three veg" cook and not averse to the occasional tinned or frozen meal. "I am pretty basic but my meals are tasty," she says. "You get good at making something if you do it over and over." Cooking involves time she would

prefer to spend on other things. Gone are the meal plans and weekly shops of her younger married days. "I've turned into a convenience shopper, shopping every couple of days, and it's a killer. You spend more, because you always get little extras."

Divorce has altered the cooking patterns in her household. Now that the kids are older, "you never know if they are going to be there for dinner or not". When she does cook, it's with minimal fuss. "If there is only one child here and the others are over at Dad's, we might have something nice and simple like scrambled eggs on toast."

It seems Joanna's family life is a relentless juggling act, and she is wistful when I ask her what she would eat when the kids are grown and gone. "I will have a more substantial lunch and then dinner ▶

society.

will be a sandwich!” Both Joanna and Carla shop locally, at a supermarket 15 minutes down the road. In the Mount Cotton area, there isn’t much alternative. And both agree it is cheaper to cook than to get takeaway. “If you hunt down some specials, you can put something on the table for two dollars a plate,” says Joanna. While Carla recognises that pizza or family meal-deals might be slightly cheaper than the sometimes elaborate meals she cooks for her family, there is another price to be paid: “The big chains offer a cheaper alternative, but not necessarily a healthier one.” Both families indulge in takeaway sparingly (maybe two or three times a month), but they have different motivations. For Joanna, a trip to McDonald’s happens when she is too tired or too busy to cook. For Carla, takeaway Thai or fish and chips is a treat for her girls.

What Joanna and Carla have in common is that both are primarily responsible for family meals. Before kids came along, each had been the main cook in her house, even though she had worked. Having children hasn’t altered this arrangement. Divorce has. Joanna’s ex-husband Michael used to cook occasionally. “Now, since we’ve been divorced, he does a lot of cooking.” And the kids have all learned to cook more: the day before, her eldest son cooked dinner – chips, sausages and gravy – because Joanna was busy at the new house fixing the floors.

Why the gender gap in the kitchen? “I have more time than my husband, even though I do work,” Carla says. “We are better at it,” is Joanna’s theory.



Both appear unperturbed by the inequality. They feel their partners and kids enjoy their cooking and neither feels taken for granted.

But what about the challenge of producing family meals day after day, year in and year out? Sitting at the table together isn’t a sticking point. Carla’s family “make a point of eating dinner at the table together, even if it means eating at seven-thirty or eight”.

In Joanna’s house, at least four dinners a week are eaten together. “Sometimes there are too many people for the table, in which case someone goes over to the TV. We might have the TV on, but we still talk.” The harder task for Joanna is coming up with meal ideas. “My recipe book is pretty lean, pretty basic. It’s not really exciting. That’s the challenge for me.”

Time, for both women, is a big issue. Making time for the management of shopping, planning meals, cooking and cleaning up.

FOOD HISTORIAN MARGARET VISSER, AUTHOR OF *The Rituals of Dinner*, says the custom of the family meal dates back two million years “to the daily return of proto-hominid hunters and foragers to divide food up with their fellows”. While the origins of the family meal might be the clan gnawing prey around a fire, our ideal picture of this daily ritual remains that of a semi-formal gathering around a table, involving both adults and children. As Visser points out, this kind of meal is an exercise in discipline and togetherness. “The dining table,” she explains, “is a constraining and control device, a place where children eat under the surveillance of adults” and are “deliberately encouraged to talk”.

In addition, the mark of a “proper” family meal is one where the TV is turned off. If everyone is spread around the lounge room with their bowls of pasta, eating on couches in front of the TV or PlayStation, children might never learn manners or the habit of polite conversation. And parents might never learn what’s on their kids’ minds.

Although our notion of a family dining together around a table is quite specific to Western cultures, we still see it as the epitome of good domestic eating, an expression of true family unity. Eating together remains “the most potent symbol of a happy, secure household”, social commentator Hugh Mackay has said. The notion is a staple of Hollywood films, television advertising and food media. As Sydney University gender studies professor Elspeth Probyn writes, “the family meal still has an amazing capacity

to make us nostalgic for the idea of a simple life”. We can’t help but associate this food with a world we fear is now passing from memory, in which neighbours knew each other and kids roamed the streets until their mothers called them in to dinner.

So potent is the idea of the home-cooked family meal that many commercial foods attempt to harness the concept in their packaging and marketing – particularly those foods we rarely have the time or inclination to make from scratch anymore. We can purchase “Family Favourite” chicken curry, frozen roast dinners, “Cook in the Pot” casserole. We can buy “Kitchen Collection” bread mix and “Home-bake” bread bearing the slogan “from our family to yours”. For dessert, there are any number of offerings from Mrs Fields, Sara Lee or Nanna.

The nutritional superiority of a home-cooked lamb roast with vegies over a frozen roast-lamb TV dinner is close to indisputable. But some are intent on finding benefits that go beyond the merely nutritional. British food writer Joanna Blythman argues that eating together can improve social skills and family ties. A 2005 article by obesity researchers in Brisbane found the odds of being overweight at 14 were greater among those whose mothers said it was not important that the family ate together. And in a 2003 summary of American research on family meals, Ohio State University academics listed numerous social benefits, including fewer mental health problems and less drug and alcohol abuse.

Even celebrity chefs have joined the fray. In an

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interview with British magazine *Good Housekeeping*, Jamie Oliver advocated families cooking and eating together as a sure-fire recipe for domestic bliss. Mum is at the heart of Oliver’s commentary. He blames the increasing number of working mothers for “naughty” food choices and the decline of the family dinner: “As far as holding a family or a nation’s food culture together, it’s always been women. And when the Industrial Revolution and two world wars kicked in ... women went to work and stayed in work ... To my mind that’s why we’ve lost our food culture.”

Oliver is trying to conjure a nostalgic view of the family dinner, something that existed in that time before the onslaught of second-wave feminism, widespread divorce and the commercialisation of food. But in fact there doesn’t appear to be much evidence that family meals are becoming extinct.

At the end of 2007, I was employed by food manufacturer Unilever Australia to conduct some research into family mealtimes in Australia. The

most important findings came from a survey of more than 1000 respondents from all over Australia. An overwhelming number – 93 per cent – reported eating family meals, with 77 per cent saying they did so at least five nights a week and 86 per cent adding that eating together as often as possible was extremely or very important to them. Women (who were more likely to be the main meal provider) placed more importance on frequent family meals than did men. The perception that people do not care about family meals, and that mothers are the main offenders, thus also proved to be a furphy.

Our research certainly uncovered some interesting findings about the *quality* of the Australian family meal. Generally, family dinners lasted about 25 minutes. In 60 per cent of cases, the TV was always or often on during dinner, but nearly 60 per cent of all respondents reported eating at the dinner table rather than in front of the TV. Perhaps the traditional notion of a meal consumed around the table, without electronic distractions, no longer holds. But what was clear from our research was that the vast majority of Australians still find the time for family meals, value them and believe them essential to fostering communication and affection between family members.

I was surprised by the amount of respondents who reported eating such meals so frequently. Perhaps this was evidence of over-reporting, a manifestation of parental guilt. Who wants to admit that they don’t make the time to eat with their family regularly? ►

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I SPEND MY SECOND NIGHT IN BRISBANE WITH another couple of working mums. These women are younger: Michelle, 30, with a seven-year-old son, and Patricia, also 30, with an eight-year-old son. When I arrive at Michelle's two-storey home in the southern suburb of Mansfield, the family is finishing dinner. Dad retires to the TV room while Mum encourages her slow-eating boy to finish his serve of chicken and salad. I sit in the dining room in front of tea and biscuits while Michelle, clad in gym gear and sneakers, tries to hurry up her son.

Patricia works three days a week at a bank but the other two days are spent studying and doing some bookkeeping. Her goal is to start up her own home-based bookkeeping business. Michelle works three days a week but also studies law and criminology as well as looking after her child. Neither can rely on family in the area, although Patricia's brother has recently moved in with them temporarily.

I ask Michelle and Patricia the same questions I asked Carla and Joanna. They tell me they are responsible for grocery shopping, done fortnightly on payday at the local supermarket with top-up trips for milk and bread in between. Husbands could rarely be trusted with the shopping. "Men tend to buy too much stuff. And they go down the lolly aisle," Patricia says.

Michelle and her husband share the cooking – there's no roster, just whoever's home first and feels like doing it. Before Liam was born, Patricia and her husband also shared the cooking; now she is responsible. She stresses that it isn't as though her

husband is relaxing with a beer on the couch while she cooks. The menu in these two homes varies. For Michelle, it's mostly meat and vegetables or salad, the occasional curry and regular summer barbecues – "nothing too exotic". The arrival of their son had brought more structure to their meals.

For Patricia, family meals are determined by health concerns. Her husband's doctor has put him on a low-fat diet, but her son is underweight and requires as much fat as possible. Patricia has to cook three different meals every night, and so often relies on pre-prepared foods. Both mums have noticed grocery prices rising, but they believe cooking from scratch is cheaper. It's hard to find time to entertain so they make a point of eating together at the table. Michelle enjoys cooking, whereas Patricia sees it as a chore: "I wouldn't say I like it. I don't have a problem doing it."

Do they feel appreciated for the family meals they produce? There's a pause. Michelle says she does. Patricia is more equivocal. "I never really think about it. I suppose so. Now that my brother is living with us, he will actually say thanks for the meal, it was great. My husband will say it now as well."

I REMEMBER WITH DEEP AFFECTION SITTING ON my nonna's kitchen bench, watching her roll, cut and boil gnocchi, fry pumpkin flowers and crostoli. I also have treasured memories of the cakes and slices and tasty dinners my mother used to prepare. But it pays to be wary of nostalgia. I know now that

this domestic labour, the fruits of which were so enjoyable to me, was bundled up with other, less edifying things: unhappiness, frustration, inequality.

And so Jamie Oliver's evocation of a golden age of family meals, which has been spoiled by the advent of working mothers, ignores an important social fact: that as women have entered the paid workforce in increasing numbers over the past three decades, men haven't taken on substantially more housework to compensate. If Oliver wants to encourage more family meals, why doesn't he criticise those fathers who won't shop, cook and clean for their own families?

It used to be that the skill of a domestic cook was measured by what she could do with scant resources – meatloaf, tuna mornay, spag bol, stews and soups are all dishes designed to stretch ingredients to feed a family on a budget. This need still exists for many, but the more scant resource nowadays is time. A return to some idealised past of Sunday roasts and a stream of complicated dishes served up on a daily basis around the communal table is neither possible nor preferable if household inequalities remain. Until some parity is reached, what does it matter if Mum has to cheat sometimes?

Foodies might sneer, but a jar of pasta sauce or a store-bought roast chicken is a small price to pay in order to get dinner on the table and all the family members around it. ■

Edited extract from *Eating Between the Lines: Food and Equality in Australia* by Rebecca Huntley (Black Inc, \$24.95), published Monday.

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