

FAST FOOD RESTAURANTS: A HEALTHIER ALTERNATIVE

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[Assignment: Isolate an American institution, and explain the reasons why such an institution came into existence, what it reveals about our values, and how effective it is in serving our needs.]

(1) "I'll take a double cheeseburger, large fries, and a jumbo Coke, please." This is a typical request made at many fast food restaurants across the United States. As the young man looks at his watch, he expects his food ready in sixty seconds or less. He has a business meeting in twelve minutes and has no time to spare. He eats in the car in less than eight minutes and enters the business meeting with thirty seconds to spare. Ten minutes later he must leave the meeting due to indigestion. Fast food restaurants came into existence to satisfy the needs of these time-conscious people. Fast food restaurants are effective in serving their purpose, but what do they reveal to us about our values and life style? Since more women are working, less time is spent in eating around the table. Few American families now use the meal as sacred time for the family where all members come together to share their lives in conversation. Also, Americans are simply too rushed to consider or care about nutrition.

(2) Basically, Americans are excessively time oriented. They expect things to be done "now" and done "right." Some intelligent human recognized this American trait and acted upon it. Fast food restaurants boomed. They serve Americans quickly and inexpensively. They fit the lifestyles of Americans whose lives seem to be run by the clock. A typical morning consists of Mother quickly eating a piece of toast washed down by a swallow of orange juice, as Johnny and Suzy hurriedly gulp down Fruit Loops and cold pizza. At two minutes till eight, Father runs down the stairs with his shirt half tucked, grabbing for his morning cup of coffee as he bellows for the children to get in the car. He pecks Mother's lips and informs her that he will grab a doughnut on the way to work. As he starts to walk out of the door, he reminds her that he has to work overtime so he'll get a bite to eat elsewhere. This is not the typical Cleaver household of the 1940's where mealtime consisted of Mother calling the children to the table as Father sat in his special chair at the head of the table. The children placed their napkins in their laps and the family bowed their heads to bless the plentiful food prepared by the mother. Mother would smile and begin to ask the children how school went followed by Father filling in his latest news about work. The 1980's household at mealtimes has little in common with the Cleaver family. To cite an example from contemporary television, the Keaton family on Family Ties is never seen eating together. Apparently, we place very little value on the kind of food we eat and the time we spend eating it.

(3) Eating used to be a time spent with the family around the table, but communal time together has been lost due to the pressures of more two career families. The mother simply does not have the time to prepare an elegant meal. More families are giving up "mealtime" to put in overtime. The working parents spend their mealtime alone sitting in the car or the booth munching on a processed meal made in less than a minute. Since women are not available to prepare complex meals, more and more Americans, children and adults, are resorting to the fast food restaurants for meals to fit into their time schedule. The joy of spending time together enjoying a nutritious, well-prepared meal has been lost due to the economic and professional pressures of career-conscious modern households.

(4) Not only has family togetherness at mealtimes been diminished but, as thriving fast food restaurants reveal, so has the value assigned to health and nutrition. Of course, there is evidence of a fitness boom in that people have increased their exercise; however, those who carefully monitor their caloric intake are still a minority. For example, the typical fast food meal has nearly two thousand calories. Each french fry consumed has about 25 calories. For most Americans, two thousand calories are more than can be burned in one day. Then Americans wonder why they're fat. It seems contradictory to me. If Americans are going to carelessly consume the high calorie, high cholesterol, and high sodium fast foods, then they should be prepared to pay the consequences.

(5) Americans have become accustomed to the taste of the greasy foods that they eat at fast food restaurants. Ideally, they need to give up these fast foods in order to improve their diet. Instead of a typical fast food meal, they should consider substituting a turkey sandwich on whole wheat bread, a salad, with an apple for dessert. A sandwich meal is just as quick, but far more nutritious. Of course, this would require changing tastes. Today Americans seem too addicted to the taste of fast food to worry enough about health and nutrition. Someday, perhaps Americans will realize that through good nutrition and exercise their overtime work could be less stressful and more worthwhile. Actually, I believe Americans are all instinctively conscious of their health, but the priority of work and pressures of time push them to consume what is most readily available. Maybe we need to offer pre-cooked health foods which take only short time to prepare in the microwave. That way, Americans would still be able to deal with the pressures of time. But they would also have other benefits. Time released from cooking could now be used for family togetherness. The family of tomorrow would still sit together at mealtime and converse, but the meal would not have taken hours to prepare. Additionally, this would be

a nutritious meal and not the greasy food consumed at fast food restaurants.

(6) Fast food restaurants are certainly effective in serving both needs of hunger and economy. These restaurants seem to attract both high class and low class, young and old. It is unlikely that the fast-paced life of Americans is going to ease up to allow for the old-fashioned meal of the past. But, as I have suggested, there still may be ways to save time on cooking, spend family time at meals, and eat healthful foods. It is time that some intelligent entrepreneur recognized our need and changed the way Americans eat by providing a viable alternative to fast food restaurants.