One is not the loneliest number: Embracing the solo dining trend

KRISTINA KASPARIAN
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 27, 2024



The mindset around solo dining is changing: According to the booking platform OpenTable, it is on the rise worldwide and up 16 per cent in Canada.

MILAN MARKOVIC/ISTOCKPHOTO / GETTY IMAGES

When I step into cozy Orianna in Milan's pulsing design district, my table is set for one. I feel an undeniable temptation to scurry back to my apartment with a giant burrata and tomatoes from the market, or maybe a pizza. Though I've lived abroad and travelled solo since my 20s, dining alone after dark is a challenge and a somewhat recent experiment in self-confidence. But why should I miss out on innovative cuisine – whether I'm on a solo trip or in my hometown of Montreal – simply because I'm on my own?

The mindset around solo dining is changing: According to the booking platform OpenTable, it is on the rise worldwide and up 16 per cent in Canada, with 89 per cent of consumers having dined alone at a sit-down restaurant in the past 12 months. And single guests are not considered an inconvenience by the restaurant industry. In contrast to large groups, solo diners tend to be simpler to serve and bigger spenders, splurging 43 per cent more than other diners according to OpenTable.

The No. 1 motivation for solo diners? An appetite for me-time. According to a 2024 global survey by the point-of-sale company Lightspeed, solo diners consider it an act of self-care.

“The narrative in the hospitality industry seems to be shifting from ‘alone and lonely’ to ‘independent and adventurous,’” says Yulia Saf, a frequent solo traveller and the founder of the blog MissTourist.com. “Dining alone is less of a taboo now, and in some cases, it’s even seen as a chic and empowered choice.”

According to Robert Coplan, Chancellor’s Professor in psychology at Carleton University, when solo dining is approached as a positive experience, it has been shown to foster calm, confidence and autonomy. Coplan, who researches the costs and benefits of solitude across the lifespan, says its wellness gains include recharged social batteries, a respite from social stimulation and pressures, a context for enhanced creativity and improved interactions with others.

“Solitude is like stepping offstage and out of the spotlight. But this is where it gets fuzzy. When dining alone in a crowd, many people would still consider themselves to be ‘onstage.’”

Though the stigma of eating alone seems to be waning, it can still be anxiety-inducing for those concerned about how they’re perceived. This spotlight bias may be driving the popularity of spots such as the Yunnan Noodle Shack in Toronto, where library-style cubicles are fitted with phone stands and call buttons that let guests decide when to interact with the staff.

“But individuals often overestimate how much attention others are paying to them while dining alone,” says Holly Whyte, registered counselling psychologist at YEG Psychology in Edmonton. ”In reality, most people are more focused on themselves than on the actions of others.”

Whyte explains the benefit of gradually learning to tolerate situations that stretch our comfort zone. “Successfully completing a solo dining experience can serve as a small victory, leading to greater self-assurance and reduced avoidance of other anxiety-provoking situations.”

Solo dining is also an opportunity for mindful eating and being in tune with our body’s hunger cues, especially when we focus on the food and ambiance. “What I like best is the uninterrupted time I can dedicate to savouring every flavour or simply being with my thoughts,” says Saf, the blogger, who also appreciates not having to rush to make her menu selection when she is unaccompanied. “The experience is far more personal and contemplative. It’s a moment just for me.”

For those who have specific dietary preferences, and worry about limiting their dining companions, it can be liberating to dine alone. For Brigitta Weiss from Winnipeg, celiac disease and the painful condition of endometriosis affect her daily life and food choices. Though she is more likely to eat out for lunch or a casual bite than an elaborate dinner, she enjoys discovering gluten-free establishments and finds the experience empowering. “Chronic illness is isolating, lonely and so boring. To enjoy a restaurant or a coffee is a small adventure. It’s trying to live a bit of the beauty of life in the face of a lot of obstacles.”

Though some solo guests prefer relaxation and introspection, restaurateurs I spoke with across the country – from Dartmouth’s Side Hustle to Montreal’s Hélicoptère – agree that solo dining is also an opportunity for connection. At many restaurants, those who come alone choose to sit at the bar or at a communal table and engage with the staff, sometimes even with strangers.

Bailey Hayward, co-owner of Gary’s, a Michelin Guide restaurant in Vancouver’s South Granville neighbourhood and one of Air Canada’s Best New Restaurants in 2024, says connecting with solo diners is a highlight for their establishment, which was inspired by dinners hosted for friends in their home.

“Solo diners are often the most engaging guests,” says Hayward. “We’ve had diners offer to share plates and bottles of wine – it’s so wonderful to see!”

So, how can restaurants improve the experience of their unaccompanied guests?

A menu that caters to solo diners’ sense of discovery, while limiting food waste, is a powerful draw.

“They seem to truly love food and are excited to taste and discover with us,” says Hayward. Gary’s growing clientele of solo diners can order its $69 tasting menu.

Half-portions are a must according to Jen Agg, owner of Bar Vendetta, Le Swan, Grey Gardens and several other Toronto restaurants.

At Flame and Smith, a farm-to-table restaurant featuring wood-fire cooking in Ontario’s Prince Edward County, co-owner Sarah Soetens and chef Hidde Zomer are proud to adapt their chef’s menu to solo guests. “The portion sizes are adjusted so the solo diner can enjoy all eight dishes without being overwhelmed. Additionally, all wines offered by the glass are available in half portions,” says Soetens.

According to Lightspeed, 43 per cent of solo diners enjoy people-watching. For Steve Edwards, general manager of Le Crocodile by Rob Feenie in Vancouver, about 50 per cent of solo guests prefer to dine at a table, some of whom even order five courses.

Fostering belonging among solo diners means thinking beyond the barstool experience and creating a more welcoming layout with window-seating or tables for one. An open kitchen, such as the one at Gary’s, adds an extra layer to the experience, according to Hayward, who has noted that solo diners enjoy watching the chef at work.

As for myself, when I dine out alone, I’m determined to take my time.

At Milan’s Orianna, I order the house specialties – risotto and some crescentine and polpette as appetizers – and text home: “I’m treating my staff tonight.” They reply with laughing emojis because I’m a solopreneur.

Then, I put my phone away for the evening: I have a dinner date with myself.

One in a regular series of stories. To read more, visit our Inspired Dining section.

Sign up for the Books Newsletter. Expand your mind and build your reading list with reviews, picks, author interviews and more

SIGN UP | EXPLORE NEWSLETTERS

Report an editorial error Report a technical issue Editorial code of conduct

Related stories



How this PEI-based chef shops for ingredients for West African dishes



More young adults are buying homes alone. How are they pulling it off?



Craving experiences beyond a typical dinner out, young people turn to the 'old way' of pasta-making