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# When is Dinner?

**Ronald B. Larson**

Food marketers regularly make references to meals and meal times. However, geographic variations in how consumers describe meals and in when meal occasions occur may limit the ability of foodservice providers, marketing researchers, and food manufacturers to effectively use any specific meal definitions. By understanding what words people use to label different meal events (e.g., "dinner" or "supper") in different areas, food marketers can improve their ability to communicate with consumers.

"When is dinner?" is a question that may be asked almost daily in many households. Family members, lexicographers, sociologists, and nutritionists are all interested in when meals occur. There is some debate whether "dinner" is a meal at midday or in the evening. Is "lunch" a meal at noon or a mid-afternoon snack? When guests are invited to "dinner," what time should they arrive? A related question is if households refer to any meal as "supper"? In some areas, community groups have spaghetti and pancake "dinners" or fish and chili "suppers" as fundraisers. Are there systematic differences in the meal names?

Answers to these questions have food-marketing applications. Foodservice providers often prepare different menus for each meal and should describe the meals with terms that customers understand. If stores promote lunch or dinner specials, they may need to adjust their advertising to each area's vocabulary. For example, what should customers pick up on their way home from work, dinner or supper? Some fast food restaurants are strongly associated with breakfast or lunch but not with dinner or supper. Foodservice providers also need to know when many people start eating breakfast, what time to switch from one menu to another, and when customer traffic is likely to decline at the end of a day.

Marketing researchers who analyze which foods consumers eat need to use words that describe the meal occasion they are studying. If definitions of meal names vary, asking people what they had

for dinner may produce very different responses.

Manufacturers also need to be aware of meal times and names. If manufacturers include the words "breakfast," "lunch," "dinner," or "supper" in a food name, on a package, or in advertising (e.g., lunch kit or supper kit) they may position a product for a particular meal or time of day. For example, consumers may believe a beverage with A.M. in the name should not be consumed after noon. Some consumers consider ready-to-eat cereal as a "breakfast food" and orange juice as a "breakfast beverage." If an advertisement promoted a particular recipe as great for dinner, would some readers consider it for the noon meal and others consider it for the evening meal? There are significant differences in food consumption patterns across the U.S. (Larson 1998). Geographic differences in the definitions of "lunch," "dinner," and "supper" could limit the sales of items that are associated with particular meal names. Research on products linked to particular meal names in some markets may not be projectable to other areas. By better understanding meal occasions, food marketers can improve the efficiency of the marketing efforts.

This research investigates when people eat meals and how they describe them. The analysis is based on a survey of 16,103 people who were asked the name and time of each meal occasion for their households (e.g., breakfasts, lunches, dinners, suppers, breaks, etc.). By analyzing the distribution of meals over an average day, new insights into the questions "When is dinner?" and "When is supper?" can be gained. Variations in the timing of meal occasions by region and by level of urbanization will also be examined.

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## Background

The definition of a meal involves many factors including the number of components, the foods chosen, the way they are prepared and combined, the number of courses, and the number of dishes within each course (Makela 2000). In the Middle Ages, it is likely that most people ate two meals per day. The first was dinner at 9 or 10 a.m. and the second was supper at 4 or 5 p.m. A third meal, breakfast, became more common over time and was firmly established in England and France by the eighteenth century (Edwards 2000). As societies have become more prosperous, they have tended to increase the number of meals per day (Kittler and Sucher 1989).

In some countries the foods served or the work schedule helped define the meals. For many years the typical evening meal in France, *souper*, included soup, while the midday meal did not (Aymard, Grignon, and Sabban 1996). Because of their long and physically demanding work days, people in Scandinavian countries developed a different meal pattern with as many as six meals per day—e.g., three hot meals and two or three lighter meals or snacks (McIntosh 1995, Prattala 2000). When people immigrated to the U.S., their meal schedules were similar to those in their home countries.

When most of the U.S. households lived in rural areas, dinner was the midday meal and supper was a smaller meal served after the field work was done. With increasing industrialization, meals began to conform to business schedules and the noon “lunch” break was short. McIntosh (1995, 154) wrote: “At least until World War II, whether a person referred to meals as breakfast, dinner, and supper or as breakfast, lunch, and dinner, quickly identified the individual as being of rural or urban origin.” During the twentieth century the number of meals eaten per day in Europe decreased (Makela 2000). In Europe, the midday meal is still the largest, while in the United States the main meal is usually eaten in the evening (Kittler and Sucher 1989).

The foodservice industry tracks customer traffic by meal. During 2000 restaurant traffic increased by one percent. Breakfast and evening-meal traffic each increased by two percent while lunch traffic (i.e., during the 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daypart) remained unchanged (Ebbin 2001). Although defining meals by the time of day is common in the foodservice industry, it does not reflect how consumers describe

the meals. Many U.S. restaurants have special breakfast menus and offer the same menu items for the midday and evening meals. Camp (1989) suggested that the separation of breakfast from other meals along with the apparent interchangeability of the terms “dinner” and “lunch” for a midday meal and “dinner” and “supper” for an evening meal may suggest lack of differentiation between the midday and evening meals. The food marketer’s challenge is to learn how to refer to meal occasions and prepare products for them without confusing consumers.

## Data

Respondents to the Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals for 1994–96 (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1998) recorded what was consumed at each meal and when it was consumed, and described the occasion as either breakfast, lunch, dinner, supper, break, or something else. Of the 447,713 food-consumption events recorded in this survey, 22.3 percent were breakfasts, 24.5 percent were lunches, 20.0 percent were dinners, 12.4 percent were suppers, and 17.6 percent were breaks. Other descriptions were used for 3.2 percent of the occasions. Because each meal occasion was also coded by region, urbanization, and food source, two key questions can be addressed:

- 1) How frequently is “supper” used to describe an evening meal and “dinner” used to describe a midday meal?
- 2) Does the definition and timing of meals vary by region, food source, or level of urbanization?

## Results

There was some variation in the average starting times for meals. The average starting time for breakfasts was 8:12 a.m. This varied from 8:08 a.m. in the South to 8:17 a.m. in the West. The average time for lunches was 12:33 p.m. This ranged from 12:29 p.m. in the Midwest to 12:38 p.m. in the West. The average time for dinners was 6:06 p.m. This varied from 5:31 p.m. in the Midwest to 6:21 p.m. in the West. The average time for suppers was 6:22 p.m. This ranged from 6:06 p.m. in the Northeast to 6:28 p.m. in the South. The average time for breaks was 4:06 p.m. This varied from 3:50 p.m. in the West to 4:15 p.m. in the Midwest.

The term "supper" was used to describe meal occasions in many parts of the U.S. In the entire sample, 76,769 dinners and 50,328 suppers were recorded between 5:00 p.m. and 10:59 p.m. Table 1 shows that Midwest survey respondents consumed more suppers than dinners. This was also true for rural (Non-Metropolitan Statistical Area or Non-MSA) consumers. However, in the Northeast and West, few meals were referred to as "suppers."

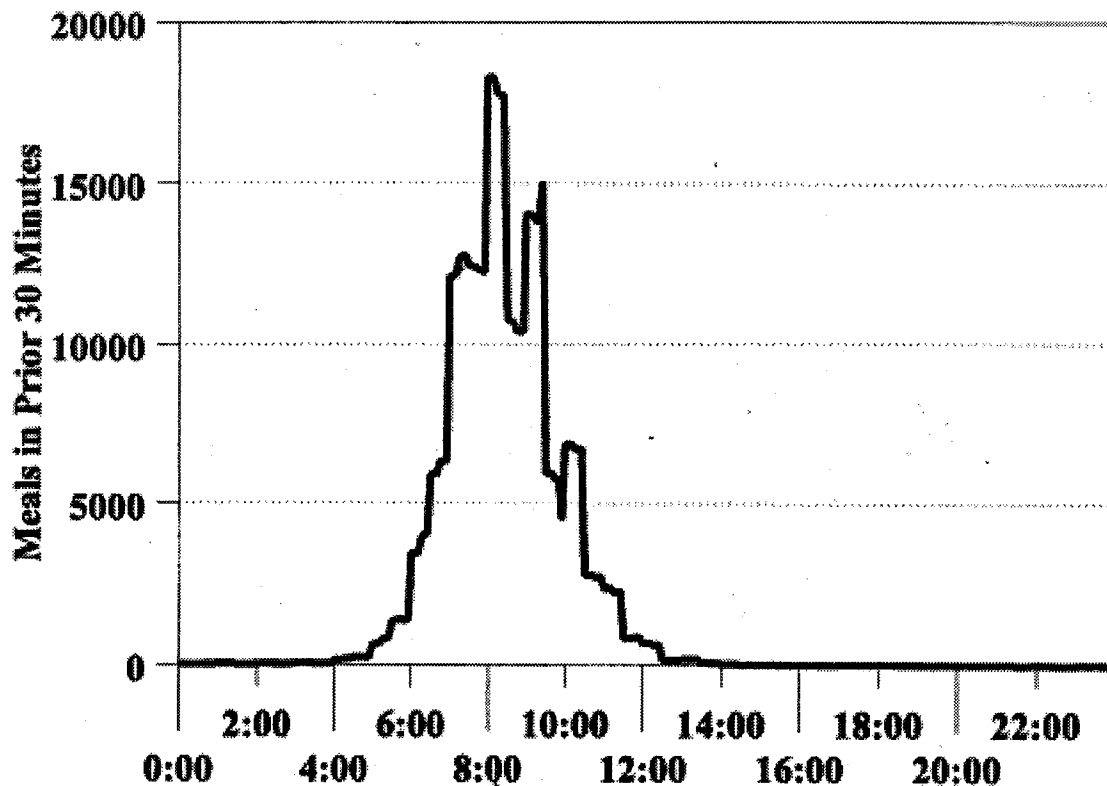
Figure 1 shows a rolling 30-minute total of the number of breakfasts in the U.S. in five-minute increments. Because some respondents may have recorded their meal times more precisely than others, the rolling total helps smooth out meal times. Each point on the curve shows the number of meals that started during the prior 30 minutes. Breakfast times appear to be spread over a six-hour time frame. Figure 2 shows that lunches were concentrated at noon. Figure 3 suggests there may be two

**Table 1. Number of Meals by Region and Level of Urbanization.**

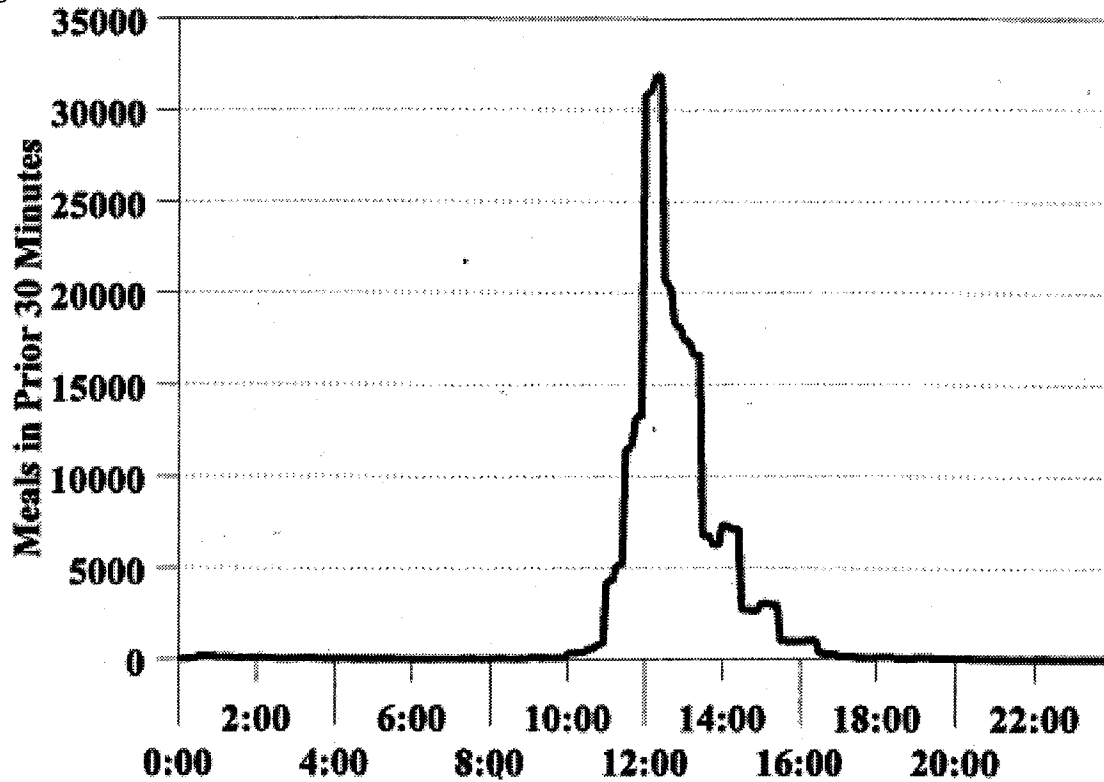
	<u>Breakfasts</u>	<u>Lunches</u>	<u>Dinners</u>	<u>Suppers</u>	<u>Breaks</u>
Northeast	19941	19811	17167	9257	16234
Midwest	23837	27294	18451	18575	20488
South	33598	38214	25576	24029	23065
West	22562	24365	28167	3514	19109
MSA, central city	30471	31705	30848	11560	23631
MSA, not central city	45802	50727	44298	21976	38738
Non-MSA	23665	27252	14215	21839	16527

Source: Based on data from U.S. Department of Agriculture (1998).

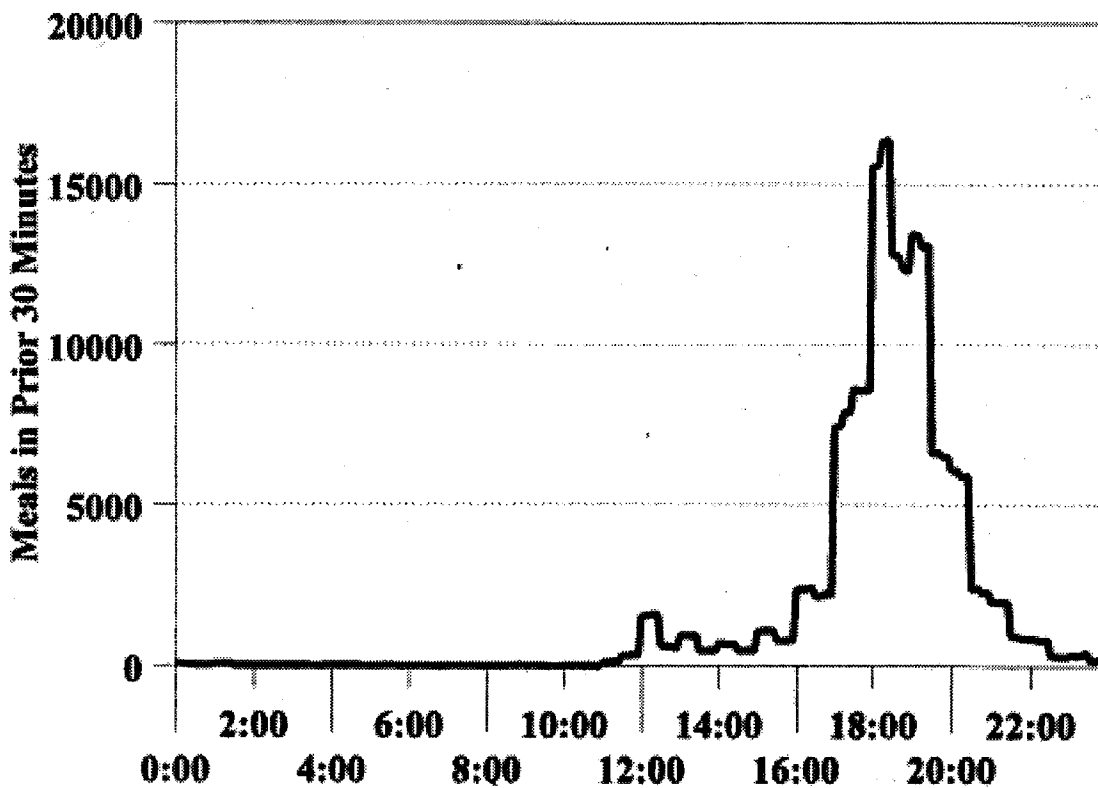
**Figure 1. Breakfast Times in the U.S.**



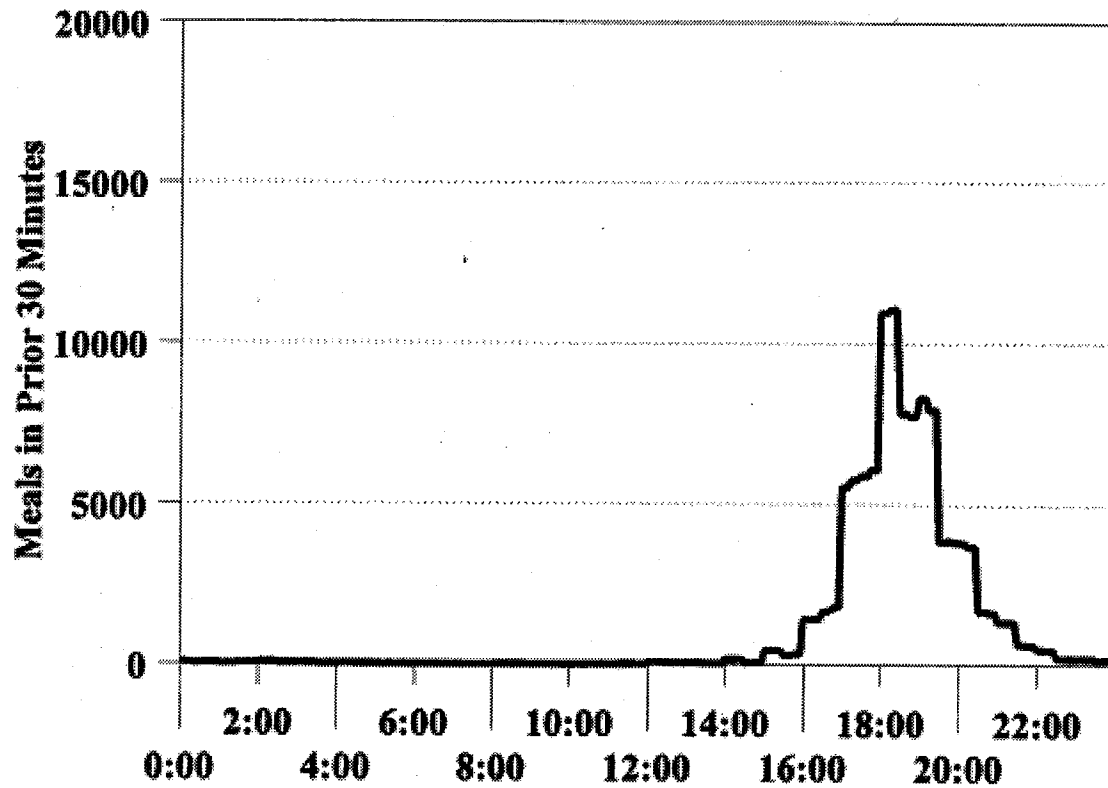
Source: Based on data from U.S. Department of Agriculture (1998).

**Figure 2. Lunch Times in the U.S.**

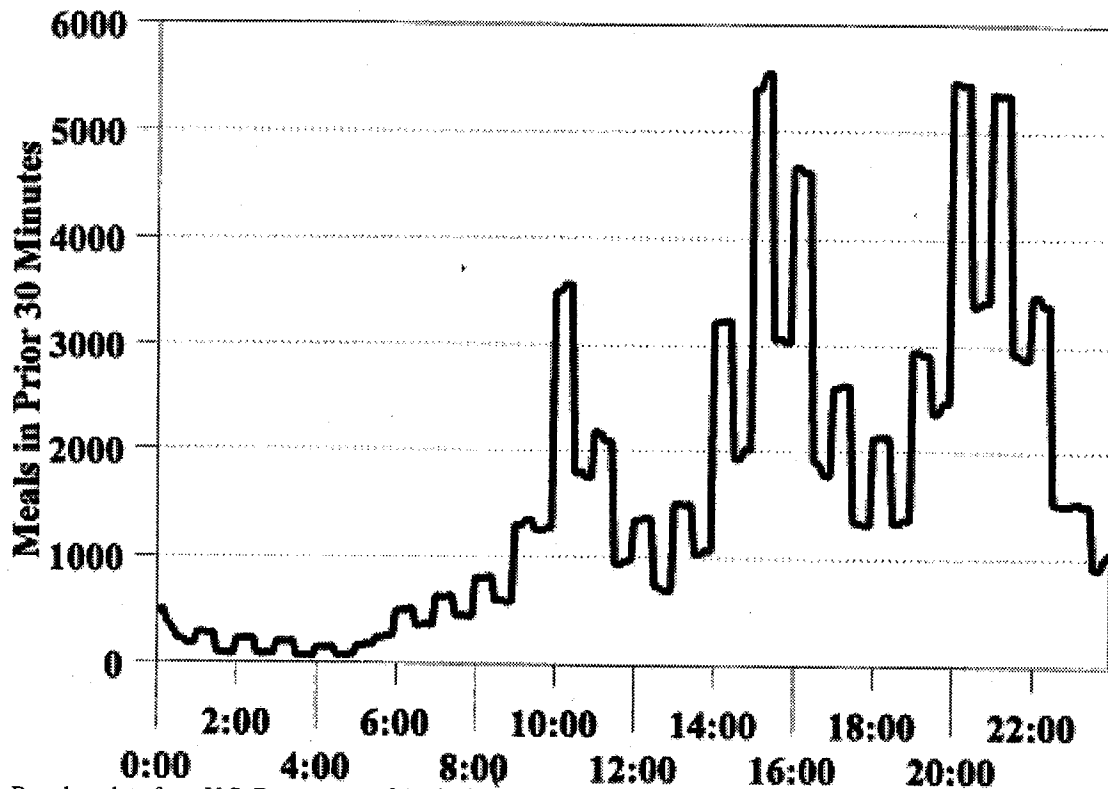
Source: Based on data from U.S. Department of Agriculture (1998).

**Figure 3. Dinner Times in the U.S.**

Source: Based on data from U.S. Department of Agriculture (1998).

**Figure 4. Supper Times in the U.S.**

Source: Based on data from U.S. Department of Agriculture (1998).

**Figure 5. Break Times in the U.S.**

Source: Based on data from U.S. Department of Agriculture (1998).

“dinner times.” Although a majority of all dinners started after 5 p.m., many people referred to their midday meal as dinner. “Supper times,” shown in Figure 4, were concentrated in the 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. daypart. Breaks at the U.S. level, shown in Figure 5, occurred throughout the day, with spikes between common meal times. A graphical analysis of regional meal times found similar patterns with a few exceptions. More breakfasts started later in the West than in other regions. About 14.4 percent of breakfasts in the West started between 10 a.m. and noon while 11.2 percent of breakfasts in the South started at that time. The lunch time distributions for the South and the West had longer tails, suggesting that more lunches started later in the day. In the Northeast and West, very few midday meals were referred to as dinners.

Table 2 shows the percentage of meals by daypart for the U.S. More than 13 percent of dinners started between 11:00 a.m. and 4:59 p.m. Differences in the number of dinners and suppers by region was also reflected in the daypart percentages. The percentage of dinners during the 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daypart ranged from 21.2 percent in the Midwest (accounting for the early average dinner time) and 13.9 percent in the South to 9.6 percent in the Northeast and 9.5 percent in the West. Some might be surprised to see more breaks occurred during the 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. daypart than other time periods. This was most pronounced in the Northeast Region with 45.24 percent of the breaks starting between 5:00 p.m. and 10:59 p.m.

Table 3 shows the distribution of meals by daypart in MSAs that are central cities, MSAs that

**Table 2. Percentage of U.S. Meals by Traditional Dayparts.**

	<u>Breakfasts</u>	<u>Lunches</u>	<u>Dinners</u>	<u>Suppers</u>	<u>Breaks</u>
5 a.m. to 11 a.m.	94.97%	1.41%	0.06%	0.03%	14.90%
11 a.m. to 5 p.m.	4.27%	97.27%	13.20%	7.98%	35.49%
5 p.m. to 11 p.m.	0.07%	0.72%	85.98%	91.01%	44.24%
11 p.m. to 5 a.m.	<u>0.70%</u>	<u>0.61%</u>	<u>0.76%</u>	<u>0.98%</u>	<u>5.37%</u>
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Data from U.S. Department of Agriculture (1998).

**Table 3. Percentage of Meals by Traditional Dayparts and by Urbanization.**

	<u>Breakfasts</u>	<u>Lunches</u>	<u>Dinners</u>	<u>Suppers</u>	<u>Breaks</u>
<u>MSA, central city</u>					
5 a.m. to 11 a.m.	93.77%	1.32%	0.04%	0.09%	13.79%
11 a.m. to 5 p.m.	5.48%	97.25%	11.46%	12.18%	35.24%
5 p.m. to 11 p.m.	0.12%	0.91%	87.59%	86.31%	44.70%
11 p.m. to 5 a.m.	0.63%	0.52%	0.91%	1.43%	6.27%
<u>MSA, not central city</u>					
5 a.m. to 11 a.m.	95.28%	1.31%	0.07%	0.01%	15.57%
11 a.m. to 5 p.m.	4.00%	97.38%	10.69%	7.92%	34.69%
5 p.m. to 11 p.m.	0.04%	0.65%	88.56%	90.91%	44.78%
11 p.m. to 5 a.m.	0.68%	0.65%	0.68%	1.16%	4.96%
<u>Non-MSA</u>					
5 a.m. to 11 a.m.	95.92%	1.72%	0.07%	0.00%	14.93%
11 a.m. to 5 p.m.	3.22%	97.06%	24.80%	5.82%	37.74%
5 p.m. to 11 p.m.	0.04%	0.60%	74.43%	93.61%	42.30%
11 p.m. to 5 a.m.	0.81%	0.62%	0.69%	0.55%	5.02%

Data from U.S. Department of Agriculture (1998).

are not central cities, and rural areas. Nearly 11.5 percent of central-city dinners occurred between 11:00 a.m. and 4:59 p.m., while 24.8 percent of rural dinners occurred during that time. During the 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. daypart, central-city residents in the sample reported consuming 27,000 dinners and 9,966 suppers, while rural residents reported consuming 10,566 dinners and 20,414 suppers.

Respondents were asked to identify the food source for a meal using about 20 different codes. The most common answer was "store." Table 4 shows that the percentage of all meals sourced from stores was similar across regions. About 88.6 percent of breakfasts in the Northeast were based on food purchased in a store. Nearly all the other options were foodservice sources (e.g., restaurant, fast food/pizza, school cafeteria, and vending machine). The higher breakfast and lunch percentages for the Northeast might be attributed to the lack of a separate deli or convenience store option in the survey.

One might expect differences in the names given to prepared-at-home meals and purchased meals. However, the food source seemed to have minimal impact on how a meal was described. For example, in the Northeast 9.6 percent of all dinners and 8.6 percent of dinners sourced from stores occurred during the 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daypart. The Midwest had one of the larger differences. During the 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daypart, 21.2 percent of Midwest dinners and 19.1 percent of dinners sourced from stores occurred. This suggests that there may be, at most, a small increase in the number of midday meals labeled as "lunches" when they were purchased from foodservices.

### Conclusions and Implications

Most meals are eaten near the traditional times. More than 83 percent of the main meal occasions

during the 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daypart are referred to as "lunches." In many areas and in many households, "dinners" are still the midday meals and "suppers" are the evening meals. The data suggest that the old stereotype of rural residents referring to their meals as breakfasts, dinners and suppers has some validity. However, more than 25 percent of evening meals in central cities were labeled as "suppers." Residents of the Midwest and the South were more likely to have dinners at midday and suppers in the evening than residents of other areas. Smaller geographic areas probably would have much more definite meal time and description patterns.

The distribution of meal-occasion times is wider in some regions than in others. National foodservice chains need to consider local traditions when planning menu names and setting times for changing from one meal's menu to another. In some areas, offering guests a dinner menu for their evening meal or switching too soon from a breakfast menu to a lunch menu could limit sales. Foodservice operators who have a large "break" business should explore staying open past 9 p.m. to capture late-night "break" sales, particularly in the Northeast. Nearly 20 percent of breaks occurred between 9 p.m. and midnight. Although meal descriptions did not appear to be significantly affected by whether people ate at home or used foodservice options, foodservice providers should continue to track traffic by daypart and evaluate meal descriptions in their local areas.

Food marketers who assume that dinners occur after 5 p.m. may have difficulty communicating their message in rural markets or with residents of the Midwest and South. Foodservice providers will need to adjust their advertising to match the local vocabulary. Marketing researchers will need to pretest their food surveys in several markets to be certain that the terminology in the questions does

**Table 4. Percentage of Meals Sourced from Stores by Region.**

	<u>Breakfasts</u>	<u>Lunches</u>	<u>Dinners</u>	<u>Suppers</u>	<u>Breaks</u>
Northeast	88.55%	65.48%	75.20%	74.41%	79.17%
Midwest	86.22%	57.57%	69.40%	70.34%	73.95%
South	85.00%	57.96%	69.99%	71.93%	78.26%
West	84.91%	59.96%	72.81%	77.66%	78.28%

Data from U.S. Department of Agriculture (1998).



not introduce bias. Food manufacturers that use the word "supper" to describe when their product should be consumed may not connect with the majority of people who do not eat suppers. Similarly, suggesting that an item would be great for a midday "dinner" may not create the intended associations with many consumers.

The answer to the question "When is dinner?" varies by household. Generalizing about the typical meal times or about the terms used to describe meals could lead food marketers to miss key business opportunities in geographic markets. Given the variations by region and level of urbanization for "dinner times" and the continued prevalence of suppers in many areas, foodservice providers, marketing researchers, and food manufacturers need to use information on local traditions when describing meals to consumers.

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