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What's for Dinner? —Menu Specialty in Food Service

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“**V**aried American plate meals” are still the dominant menu specialty for the U.S. foodservice industry, with hamburgers and hot dogs in second place.

A “varied American plate meal” can be defined as a meat, poultry, or fish entree; a vegetable, usually a form of potato or rice; and a salad or serving of fruit. The items are frequently rotated.

Data developed by ERS researchers from a national survey of the food service industry conducted by the International Foodservice Manufacturers Association in 1979 show that 31.5 percent of all separate eating places—those that sell food for profit and are not part of another business—classify their menu specialty as a varied American plate meal. Hamburgers and hot dogs were listed as specialties by an additional 15.4 percent of the separate eating places.

Compared with a similar study done in 1966, the 1979 survey shows the number of separate eating places increased from 54 percent of the food service industry (or 201,700 establishments in 1966) to 61 percent, (or 231,000 establishments in 1979).

Changes in the quantities and mix of

foods served in separate eating places have significant implications for farmers and consumers in terms of commodity demand and the nutritional content of the food supply.

Menu Specialty

Following varied American plate meals, and hamburgers and hotdogs, the most frequent responses to the question “What is the menu specialty of this food service operation?” were sandwiches (9.3 percent), ice cream, donuts, and pastry (7.3 percent) and pizza (7.2 percent). “Poultry specialty” was among the least frequently cited categories. French or Oriental specialties, which had fewer responses were grouped under the “Other” category (table 1).

Food service operators were asked the same question about menu specialty in the 1966 survey of the food service industry. Table 2 shows the number and percentages of separate eating places serving each of the menu specialties for 1966 and 1979. Separate eating places specializing in varied American plate meals and Italian foods declined 9 and 1 percentage points, respectively, be-



tween 1966 and 1979. Conversely, the number of establishments with seafood, poultry, steaks, chops, and roast beef menu specialties increased. Direct comparisons can not be made for establishments serving Mexican foods, pizza, hamburgers or hot dogs, ice cream, donuts, and pastry because of definitional differences between the two surveys.

Annual Sales

Projected sales of food and nonalcoholic

Table 1—Separate Eating Places: Number and Sales by Menu Specialty, 1979^P

Selected Characteristics	Varied American Plate Meals	Hamburger, Hot dogs	Sandwiches	Ice Cream, Donuts, Pastry	Pizza	Steaks, Chops, Roast Beef	Seafood	Mexican Foods	Italian Foods	Chicken or Turkey	Other	All Types
Number of establishments	72,739	35,576	21,598	16,766	16,705	14,765	11,397	9,795	9,602	8,222	13,853	231,018
Percentage of establishments	31.5	15.4	9.3	7.3	7.2	6.4	4.9	4.2	4.2	3.6	6.0	100.0
Annual Sales (millions of dollars)	19,784.6	11,667.6	3,076.0	3,058.9	3,014.2	4,414.8	5,323.7	1,818.0	1,496.6	2,111.5	2,615.8	58,381.7
Average annual sales per establishment (dollars)	271,995	327,963	142,421	182,447	180,437	299,005	467,100	185,606	155,863	256,810	188,826	252,715

P — preliminary

Source: Survey of the Food Service Industry.

Table 2—Separate Eating Places: Comparison of Selected Characteristics Between 1966 and 1979 by Menu Specialty^P

Selected Characteristics	Varied American Plate Meals	Steaks, Chops, Roast Beef	Seafood	Italian food	Chicken or Turkey	Other	All Types
Number of establishments (1979)	72,739	14,765	11,397	9,602	8,222	114,293	231,018
Number of establishments (1966)	80,613	9,199	4,337	10,046	5,992	91,547	201,734
Percentage of establishments (1979)	31.5	6.4	4.9	4.2	3.6	49.4	100.0
Percentage of establishments (1966)	40.0	4.6	2.1	5.0	3.0	45.3	100.0
Percentage point change in number of establishments (from 1966 to 1979)	-8.5	1.8	2.8	-0.8	0.6	4.1	n/a
Average annual sales per establishment (dollars) 1979	271,995	299,005	467,116	155,863	256,810	220,928	252,715
Average annual sales per establishment, adjusted (dollars) 1966	173,023	277,802	276,026	142,326	204,990	129,415	159,577
Real growth in establishment size (from 1966 to 1979)	57.2	7.6	69.2	9.5	25.3	70.7	58.4

P—preliminary

Source: Survey of the Food Service Industry.

beverages by separate eating places were estimated at more than \$58 billion. Data are for the most recent accounting period prior to the interview which, for the most part, represented the period July 1978-79. Establishments specializing in varied American plate meals or hamburgers and hot dogs accounted for more than half of total sales. Seafood establishments and eating places

specializing in steaks, chops, and roast beef ranked third and fourth, respectively.

Although there were twice as many eating places specializing in sandwiches, pizza, or ice cream, donuts, and pastry compared to those specializing in seafood, steaks, chops, and roast beef, total sales of the two groups were about the same, reflecting the effects of differing menu prices and patronage (number of transactions). Average annual sales per separate eating place reflect these factors to some extent. For example, sepa-

rate eating places specializing in sandwiches ranked third when classified by number of establishments and tenth when classified by average annual sales. Conversely, poultry specialty restaurants ranked tenth when classified by number of outlets and fifth by average annual sales.

Establishment Size

Changes in establishment size between the two surveys were examined by comparing average annual sales per establishment after adjusting the 1966 data for changes in menu prices due to inflation. Adjustments were based on changes in the Consumer Price Index for food away from home. The Consumer Price Index represents all meal and snack prices and is not weighted to represent retail food prices for specific menu specialties. Thus, this adjustment is only an approximation. Table 2 shows the percentage change (real growth) in establishment size by menu specialty between the two surveys. Varied American plate meals and seafood were the big leaders with 57.2 and 69.2 percent growth, respectively.

Increases in establishment size for eating places which served varied American plate meals between 1966 and 1979 were accompanied by a decrease in number of establishments. This indicates that owner/operators of smaller eating places—probably independents—are leaving the business. A look at U.S. Bureau of the Census figures on the number of single-unit eating places substantiates these findings. In 1967, more than 90 percent of all eating establishments were single-unit firms. By 1977, this percentage had fallen to 80 percent.

Those who continue to offer this menu specialty are apparently operators of larger separate eating places who manage relatively efficient operations and are able to compete for restaurant patronage. Average sales for eating places specializing in varied American plate meals will likely continue to increase, although such restaurants are expected to face stiffer competition from multi-unit firms that specialize in limited menu offerings. ■