



This page, top: Loyalist College culinary management students share a laugh as their classmate Jared Bihun, centre, plays with his food in the Club 213 kitchen after serving the meals they made.

Right: Aaron Crawford heads back to McCurdy GM in Trenton, Ont. after grabbing a sandwich from Tim Hortons. Though Crawford often makes it back home to share a meal with his wife, he regularly eats at work when meeting customers or finalizing sales.

Below: Alfred and Marlene Gooding have supper at Bayview Retirement Residence in Belleville, Ont. The couple have been married for 56 years and moved to Bayview after Alfred's health began to decline.

Bottom left: Ahmed Himada tastes the baked chicken and vegetable dish he made for supper at his home in Kingston, Ont.. Himada lives with one other housemate but they often don't eat together. He says he's often still preparing his meals by the time she's finished making and eating hers.



## A Call to Dinnertime

There's just over an hour and a half until dinnertime, but Genevieve Cairns has a lot on her plate.

The mother of two is bustling around her Amherstview, Ont. bungalow. Dinner is almost ready, but the Christmas cookies Cairns has been making all afternoon are still in the mix. Her son Liam, 6, joins her, and he sits on the floor, cross-legged, breaking eggs into a bowl. A ladder and wooden step stool stand near-by so that Liam and his sister Becky, 2, can help out with the baking.

It's a fine balance between efficiency and chaos, but it's one that Cairns is familiar with. After all, it's the same picture that plays out every day.

For a family with two working parents like Cairns and her husband Rick, the only routine is no routine.

"The average dinner is absolutely insane," Cairns says. "It's sort of all over the place. It depends on who's working what hours."

"We do like to sit down as a family but most of the time it's just me and the kids."

The Cairns family isn't alone in their struggle against the clock to spend time with each other. Across the country, families are fighting a losing battle to find the balance between work and family.

A 2006 Statistics Canada study found that Canadian workers are spending less time with their families than they did 20 years ago. Today's working parents spends an average 3.4 hours with their children a day—down from 4.2 hours a day in 2005.

It's a difference Cairns herself is cognizant of, looking back to her childhood growing up in Kingston and the traditional mealtime her family shared. Cairns and her younger sister could always count on a meal of meat and potatoes and a selection from her father's vast music collection.

"We always sat around the table and talked during dinner. It was always something that my mom had made when she got back from work and I don't know how she did it."

Times aren't the same though, and Cairns says she often struggles to figure out what to make for supper.

"I don't remember eating takeout nearly as much with my family. The number of times we actually get a home cooked meal is surprising."

4,000 kilometres away in Vancouver, B.C., the changing times are also a consideration for 23-year-old Ronan Sabo-Walsh.

The corporate finance analyst and recent University of British Columbia graduate lives at his parents' home in Vancouver's west side but conflicting schedules have made the family's once predictable family mealtimes irregular.

The family still gathers a few times a week in their dining room, ornate with a long mahogany table and antique chairs. Paintings of flowers, works made by an old neighbour, are framed along the walls. A bottle of merlot sits on a cabinet, ready to be poured into crystal chalice.

Growing up and differing schedules made sitting down together difficult. Family dinners, complete with two parents and both boys—Ronan's twin brother Stefan—went from six days a week to four.

"The frequency is what has changed the most. When we were in high school, we would come and eat together as a family. When we went to [U.B.C.], it became less common." Some things have stayed the same. The menu hasn't

Photos and Story by Justin Tang

changed: Sabo-Walsh's father Roman is still in charge of the cooking, a rotating menu of fish, lamb and sausage. But the dynamic is different, Sabo-Walsh says. His twin brother, Stefan, is away in Dublin, at grad school and their family's much loved Jack Russell Terrier, Fred, passed away a year ago.

Nonetheless, Sabo-Walsh looks on the time his family spent together as influential to his upbringing and his understanding of family.

"We always made an effort to sit down and gather. Dinner for me now means sitting down and taking time out of the day to enjoy [a meal] and talk. Most of our best discussions were the ones that happened at the dinner table when we'd discuss what we were doing and update each other on the family happenings."

"You can just sit down, relax and you don't really worry about anything else or anybody else except for you and your family, which is important."

Dinner is different for students living away from home like Queen's University education student Ahmed Himada.

There's no Kraft Dinner or instant noodles for the 22-year-old, who doesn't mind spending extra time with food preparation. There's an unconscious smile of satisfaction on his face as he chops carrots and Brussels sprouts before placing them in a pan and drizzling them with olive oil.

Cooking, after all, is one of Himada's favourite things to do.

"It fills me with joy when I make something and it turns out well. I feel there's almost a sense of pride in my art."

These days, Himada often cooks and eats alone, though he and his housemate will often eat their separately cooked meals together.

Though his family seldom ate together except during Ramadan, Himada credits times his family shared together for helping build his skills as an adult.

"At a family dinner, you're learning social skills, like active listening: 'Now I have to listen to this other person's story before mine.'"

Sabo-Walsh agrees: the meal isn't just about what's on the plates.

"I think a lot of people get caught up. Myself too. I sit down, my cellphone goes off and I'm tempted to look at it. But family dinner is a good time to put all that stuff away and say, 'Hey, it's just us, we're the important ones. Let's talk to each other without looking at anything else or any distractions for even 20 minutes that's all it takes.'"

He pauses, reminiscing about Fred. The family dog often had his own seat near the head of the table. For Sabo-Walsh, the family dinner encompasses the values his family shared.

"He was our comic relief. We had a dog at the table that got fed like we did. I don't know how many families did that. I'm not saying it's good or bad, but you can tell a lot about a family based on what kind of dinner they do."

For Genevieve Cairns, just getting the family together is the important part.

"I would like to do it with my children but there's no time," she says, recalling her mother's home cooked meals. "As long as the kids eat something and you try to make it as healthy as possible, it's fine."

"I think the dinner is not as much about food but sitting down as a family and talking and we're pretty good at that."



This page, top: Genevieve Cairns talks with Liam as Becky finishes her glass of milk. Each night's dinner is a busy event for Cairns, who prepared macaroni and cheese for her two children, husband as well as her mother-in-law and a visiting friend.

Above: Roman, Mari and Ronan Sabo-Walsh talk after supper in their Vancouver, B.C. home. The family often spends time after dinner talking about their day or current events.

Left: Rod Dawson, 84, eats a light supper in his bungalow in Kingston, Ont. Dawson is a widower and says that preparing lower quality meals is easier when only cooking for oneself.

Bottom left: Linda Wills looks for a show to watch on the television as she sits down for dinner in her Belleville, Ont. living room. While Wills shares her home with her adult son Jonathan, they do not eat together as he prefers to spend his time in his room.

Bottom centre: The Vilela family, from left, Cristiano, Oliver, 3, Kathryn, Sophia, 1, and Elena, 6, pray before sharing a meal of homemade pizzas and Caesar salad in their Kingston, Ont. home.

