

CONVENIENCE FOOD

When Rome was at its peak, many of its people lived in *insulae* —apartment blocks without kitchens— and bought food ready-cooked from stalls. In those days, the cost of fuel made cooking for many people more efficient than cooking for a few. These days it is the cost of labour that is driving people out to buy fast food: they do not have the time to cook because they are working to earn money.

The proportion of women going out to work is probably the main force pushing this time-saving trend. Britain and America are the countries with higher rates of convenience-food consumption and number of working women. Convenience takes different forms in Britain and America. In America, people buy food more in restaurants and takeaways, and eat it in their cars, homes or offices. In Britain, ready meals from supermarkets are the main result of the drive to convenience. Ten years ago, the sector barely existed; now it is worth £1.5 billion. These days, Tesco launches 1,200 new convenience products a year. Variety increases consumption.

Convenience is taking over supermarkets' fresh produce departments. Bagged salad hardly existed five years ago. Now Tesco sells £150m worth a year. The basic lettuce has gone: these days it is washed and mixed with herbs and croutons. «Lettuce», says Tesco's manager, «was a slow-growing business. We've brought some excitement to it».

Convenience food helps companies by creating growth; but what is its effect on people? Disastrous, according to an historian at Queen Mary, University of London. «For people who think cooking was the foundation of civilisation, the microwave... is the last enemy... The communion of eating together is easily broken by this device that liberates family members from waiting for mealtimes... The companionship of the camp fire, cooking pot and common table, which have helped humans to create collaborative links for at least 150,000 years, could be broken.»

Meals have certainly suffered from the rise of convenience food. The only meals regularly taken together in Britain these days are at the weekend. Indeed, the day's first meal has almost disappeared. In the 20th century the leisurely carnivorous British breakfast was replaced by the cornflake; in the 21st century, breakfast is vanishing altogether a victim of the quick cup of coffee in Starbucks and the cereal bar.

Convenience food has also made people forget how to cook. One of the apparent paradoxes of modern food is that, while the amount of time spent cooking meals in Britain has fallen from 60 minutes a day in 1980 to 13 minutes a day in 2002, the number of books and television programmes on cooking has multiplied. But perhaps this isn't a paradox. Maybe it is because people can't cook any more, so they need to be told how to do it.

Convenience food also has an impact on health. Of course, there is nothing intrinsically bad about ready-to-eat food. But these days it is easier for people to eat the kind of food that makes them fat. Three Harvard economists, in their paper «Why have Americans become more obese?», point out that, in the past, if people wanted to eat fatty hot food, they had to cook it. That took time and energy, which discouraged consumption of that sort of food. Today mass preparation of food has taken away that limitation.

(From the press. Adapted)

stall: parada de venda en mercats i al carrer / puesto de venta en mercados y en la calle

Tesco: una de les principals cadenes d'hipermercats de la Gran Bretanya / una de las principales cadenas de hipermercados de Gran Bretaña

launch: llançar (un producte) al mercat / lanzar (un producto) al mercado

leisurely: tranquil, pausat / tranquilo, pausado

Starbucks: cadena americana de cafeteries / cadena americana de cafeterías

Série 5 - A

PART ONE: READING COMPREHENSION

Choose the best answer.

[0,5 points each correct answer]

1. Why didn't Romans at a time cook at home?
 - a) Because it was cheaper to buy ready-cooked food.
 - b) Because they had to work and had no time.
 - c) Because kitchens were not big enough.

2. The most important factor in the increase of fast food consumption over the past few years is the fact that...
 - a) people like going out to eat.
 - b) it is a more efficient way to eat.
 - c) most adults work nowadays.

3. Convenience food can be bought in...
 - a) restaurants and takeaways, but not in supermarkets.
 - b) supermarkets, but not in restaurants and takeaways.
 - c) restaurants, takeaways and supermarkets.

4. One of these statements is true. Which one?
 - a) Buying convenience food is a tendency that started fifty years ago.
 - b) The market for convenience food has started to decline in favour of fresh products.
 - c) The growth of convenience food consumption appears to be unstoppable.

5. According to the article, how has convenience food and the microwave affected meals?
 - a) Family members no longer cook together.
 - b) Families no longer have most meals together.
 - c) Family members have to wait for mealtimes.

6. In which way are breakfast habits recently changing in Britain? More and more people...
 - a) no longer have breakfast at home.
 - b) are having bacon and eggs instead of cornflake for breakfast.
 - c) are not having breakfast at all.

7. People are now interested in books and TV programmes on cooking because...
 - a) they like preparing international dishes.
 - b) cooks are becoming international stars.
 - c) they need to learn how to cook.

8. Ready-to-eat food has a negative impact on health because...
 - a) people can eat unhealthy food without having to cook it.
 - b) it does not bring as much energy as home-made meals.
 - c) this type of food is, by definition, fatty and unhealthy.