

No more stigma of eating alone: New restaurant prepares to open for solo diners

PICTURE the scene when a diner walks into a restaurant and requests a table for one.



Waiters look aghast, the place falls eerily silent as the buzz of early evening conversation dies and tumbleweed blows across the room.

Eventually the maitre d' takes control, ushering the lone arrival to a cramped area near the toilets.

All the staff then mysteriously disappear leaving the poor soul, who has forgotten to bring a book, to stare at the wallpaper for the next 30 minutes.

To say that eating out alone has traditionally carried a bit of a stigma is an understatement.

For some people it remains the equivalent of committing social suicide.

But as the UK prepares for the opening of its first [restaurant](#) offering only tables for one – part of Dutch chain Eenmaal – attitudes are changing.

Eateries are making more of an effort to attract lone diners.

The tactic seems to be working with reports of a big increase in numbers choosing to eat solo.

A new survey by HospitalityGEM shows that one in four people eats out alone at least once a month.

With an estimated nine million single people living alone in the UK there is a vast, largely untapped market out there.

“A lot of our customers [eat](#) on their own and we simply can’t afford to ignore the trend,” says Mat Horvath, general manager of The Fable bar and restaurant in Holborn, London, which opened eight months ago.

The venue is not specifically for single diners but there are three bar areas on different levels, making the place more cosy, shelves full of books and plenty of window seats which are ideal for people-watching.

“We try to create a relaxed environment with staff encouraged to chat and make people who are [eating](#) on their own feel welcome.

It’s a big market and I can see it growing,” says Horvath.

Along with better awareness in the restaurant trade, wide availability of wireless internet is credited with luring solo diners.

It allows them to keep busy during those potentially awkward gaps after ordering food, with the added bonus of being able to avoid the occasional pitying glance from fellow diners who are behind the times and still regard eating alone as the last taboo.

A study by O2 found that 53 per cent of diners are happy to eat alone if they can check emails, browse the internet and connect with friends.

Some restaurants, including Merchants Tavern in trendy Shoreditch, have created open kitchens.

If you’re alone, without conversation between courses, you can sit and watch your meal being prepared and even discuss the ingredients with [the chef](#).

Ann Elliott, 58, who runs a PR company in Milton Keynes, has 40 clients from the hospitality trade and dines out alone about eight times a month.

“I’m a real foodie and love eating out with my partner, friends, family and on my own,” she says.

“If I’m alone I enjoy people-watching and studying the menu.

I always take my iPad so I have something to keep me occupied.

“Eating alone is a different type of experience.

You tend to finish quicker and usually I will order only one course.

I tend to look for a table where I'm not surrounded by couples.

I can honestly say I don't feel awkward and I'm not aware that I've been stared at.

“I do see a lot of people eating alone now, particularly in London.

There is an art to making solo diners feel welcome.

Waiters must engage with you and get the food served quickly.”

Ann's thoughts echo those of the eminent playboy and businessman Nubar Gulbenkian who lived in London's Ritz Hotel during the 1960s and said: “The best number for a **dinner party** is two – myself and a damn good head waiter.”

Chains are also catching on.

At Cote, which has more than 50 branches, waiters are instructed to offer window tables, less exposed tables or booths to anyone who is eating alone.

Sushi bars, where diners can choose dishes from a conveyor belt, are also popular with lone diners.

Allowing people to eat at a bar, which is bustling with activity and has chatty staff is one tactic to encourage lone diners.

Offering tasting menus with lots of small dishes which arrive without long gaps between courses is another. Eenmaal restaurant in Amsterdam has just one rule: you must eat alone and all the tables are set up for just one person.

Creator Marina van Goor says: “If you sit at a communal table you're expected to chat and talk and I wanted people to know that solitary dining can be an inspiring experience.

I wanted to break the perception that eating out alone isn't very attractive.”

Marina says the idea allows people to focus more on their food and the place has been fully booked since opening a year ago.

Sister branches open in London, Antwerp, Berlin and New York this year.

One restaurant in Tokyo has taken a different approach, providing giant stuffed Moomin toys to fill the empty seat opposite anyone dining alone.

However some diners have complained that eating with a stuffed companion draws attention when they often just want to blend in and be treated like the others.

Ottawa restaurateur Stephen Beckta says fine dining establishments should see a solo diner as “the greatest compliment a restaurant can receive”.

His three restaurants Beckta, Play and Gezellig are magnets for lone diners in the Canadian capital.

“Solo diners choose to eat with us for the pleasure of dining, not because they were roped into a celebration or a date so why would we not embrace them?”

That even extends to offering a free lunch to guests who have booked a date reservation for two, only to find themselves stood up.

Over here there are no precise figures for the number of people eating alone but the higher divorce rate is thought to be another reason for the upwards trend.

Research shows people are more likely to eat alone at lunch time than in the evening.

There’s also a north-south divide with diners apparently more confident about being alone in the south.

One fear among women is that they will get unwanted attention, including drinks being sent over by male diners. Louise Bolotin from Manchester, who writes a blog called the Lone Gourmet about cooking for one, believes we still lag behind the Continent.

She says: “I’ve lived in Paris and Amsterdam where it’s quite normal to eat out alone.

When I’m abroad I never seem to get the horrible, dark tables and I’m allowed to linger over my food for as long as I want.

“I enjoy my own company but here I still think eating alone is regarded as sad and pathetic by some restaurants.

There’s still a sense that lone diners are an inconvenience who are taking up a table that might otherwise have accommodated two people.

“That attitude does annoy me and with so many of us living alone now restaurants which ignore the single pound are being foolish.

“Having said all that I do think matters are improving and it’s partly due to the British becoming less reserved and self-conscious about eating on their own.”