



Eating and Drinking in Four Nordic Countries: Recent Changes

62

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Contents

Introduction	1324
Researching De-traditionalization and Disruption of Eating Patterns	1326
Changes in Everyday Eating in Nordic Countries	1328
The Food: Underlying Traits Are Stable	1328
The Rhythm: Distinct and Enduring National Patterns	1330
The Social Context: Stable but Changes in the Codes of Conduct	1333
Eating Out: Modest with Remaining National Traits	1335
Conclusion: No Strong Evidence of De-traditionalization and Dissolution	1337
References	1339

Abstract

This chapter addresses social and cultural aspects of eating and drinking in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden and how this has changed in the period between 1997 and 2012. Public and scholarly debate have raised questions about whether traditional and ordinary eating patterns and the role of meals are changing in modern postindustrial societies, with nibbling, individualization, de-traditionalization, disruption, gastronomy, globalization, meal erosion, and commercialization replacing shared rhythms, social meals, and national food cultures. To address this, comprehensive data are needed

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which track micro changes in daily life and acknowledge the multidimensionality of eating. Results are presented from two empirical studies conducted 15 years apart, both of which included large national samples of the adult populations in the four countries. The studies were based on a model of *the eating system*, which combines physical, organizational, and sociocultural aspects of eating by focusing on three elements: the time structure of eating patterns, the meal formats, and the social organization of eating. Nationally distinct and socially shared eating patterns persist within each of the four countries, and there is little evidence of dissolution and individualization of traditional eating patterns in terms of the timing and number of eating events or of the social context of eating. In the Nordic countries, eating still primarily takes place in the home, and in the company of family members. The most striking changes relate to the conduct of meals, where informal codes of conduct appear to be spreading.

Introduction

This chapter presents changes in Nordic eating habits over the last decades. It builds on a sociological tradition in food research that treats food and eating mainly as social phenomena, linked to the overall organization of daily life in terms of time and place, social relations, and rules of conduct. The focus is on the mundane, or ordinary, aspects of eating and how these are transformed along with changes taking place in modern societies generally as well as more specific features of countries in the Nordic region: Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden.

Historically, national and regional food cultures in different parts of the world were distinct and formed by specific geographical, economic, and political conditions (Johansen 1998; Mennel 2010). Today, simple and often mass-produced dishes are more dominant, promoted by an increasingly globalized, homogenizing food industry (see Ritzer's concept of "McDonaldization") (Warde 1997; Ritzer 1993). But there is also a revival and reinvention of local and regional food cultures which prioritize local provisioning, authenticity, fresh food, and traditional, culturally specific dishes (Counihan and Siniscalchi 2014). The question is to which extent local traits are still dominant in national food cultures.

How and what we eat within national food cultures are influenced by the rhythm and organization of work and family life. In Austria, Rotenberg (1981) observed a change from a five-meal to a three-meal pattern following industrialization in Vienna, involving a shift in the location of daily meals, which implied that also the social company at meals changed. This decline in the number of eating events has been observed in several industrialized countries (Prättälä and Helminen 1990).

Eating is an important operator of social life and has a primary social function. Meals in private households have been described as the medium by which families are created and re-created on a daily basis (DeVault 1991; Jackson et al. 2009; Julier 2013) and an important arena for the socialization of children into central cultural norms and values (Fischler 2011). For at least half a century, both mass media and scholars have claimed that traditional, regular eating patterns

and meal formats have given way to a more irregular and de-structured style of eating (Mestdag 2005, Southerton et al. 2012). Regular meals eaten at home together with all, or most, family members are replaced, it is said, by individual snacking and fast food. Commercialization, globalization, and even “Americanization,” as well as the changing social status of women, are often mentioned as the main developments lying behind this process of eroding meals. Market researchers use the term “grazing” (Caplan 1997) to describe this allegedly new, hurried way of eating, also characterized as “vagabond feeding” or “nibbling” (Poulain 2002, 2008) and, in Sweden, “frukostisering” (meaning *breakfastization*) (Ekström 1990). An increase in the total number of meals and a decrease in meals taken with family members would indicate changes toward erosion of traditional social eating in households. At the same time, it has been suggested that meals increasingly relocate from the home and the family context to commercial places such as restaurants, cafés, fast-food outlets, or canteens (Julier 2013).

This discussion draws attention to changes taking place when societies shift from industrial to postindustrial. Interesting questions are therefore how this societal shift affects eating as part of everyday life, to which extent people still share common eating times, whether we can identify typical national peaks in the timing of daily eating, and whether eating more and more takes place out of home.

Such shifts would also imply changes in the cultural norms around eating. All societies and cultural groups have models for good eating that dictate what foods should and should not be eaten, how foods should be ordered in terms of their combination and sequence (Douglas 1975; Fischler 1988; Murcott 1982), and what is the appropriate conduct while eating. Frequently applied in Nordic research is the concept of “the proper meal” – a notion originating in British studies about the meaning of meals in households (Douglas and Nicod 1974; Murcott 1982, Ekström 1990; Bugge and Døving 2000). Some claim that the meal is losing its significance as an event in its own right, since eating events increasingly take place simultaneously with other activities (Bugge and Døving 2000). Wouters (2004) has suggested that the rules of proper eating conduct, or table manners, are not as strict as they once were and allow for more individual variation and heterogeneity in behavior, thus expanding the cultural space of human action. The claims that traditional rules, norms, and standards applying to good food and the conduct of meals are dissolving have led to sociological literature raising the question of what comes in their place (Warde 1997). The concept of *gastro-anomie* (Fischler 1988, 2011) captures an extreme version of the idea that eating patterns have become irregular and individualized and that cultural eating norms are disappearing. This evolution is often associated with the fear of loss of social cohesion and order. Indications of de-structuration are the increasing use of convenience foods, the replacing of hot cooked meals with cold dishes, a more relaxed meal structure and rhythm, fewer shared meals, and less time spent eating than earlier (Mäkelä et al. 2001). However, meals may well become simpler and yet still be socially structured and regarded as “proper” by those who consume them (Marshall and Anderson 2002).

A typical shortcoming in existing research is that commensality, in terms of the temporal, social, and spatial setting of the meal, is usually studied separately from what is eaten. Moreover, normative expectations and actual activities are often mixed up in the debate. The very combination of these different aspects is crucial for an adequate understanding of the changes in eating habits. It is evident that across countries and cultures, there are differences in, for instance, what types of foods are eaten at mealtimes, whether the food is hot or cold, the number of ingredients and components, the sequences of different dishes, the meal venue, and those with whom meals are typically eaten.

This chapter will address the modernization of eating in the Nordic countries by focusing on three empirical questions: What does the contemporary Nordic menu look like; is it transformed in line with trends of “McDonaldization” or characterized by tradition and counteracting trends? What is the fate of regular social meals? Has eating away from home increased?

Researching De-traditionalization and Disruption of Eating Patterns

It is an empirical question whether today’s daily eating habits resemble the more traditional, home-based, family-centered ideal or are increasingly characterized by individualization, grazing, and gastro-anomie (Jackson et al. 2009). Yet, with some exceptions (Poulain 2002; Mestdag 2005; Mandemakers and Roeters 2015), empirical studies to date looking into the matter are sparse. One reason for this may be that it is difficult to examine the issue in sufficient detail using typical questionnaire studies. This is because terms such as “grazing” and “vagabond feeding” point to simultaneous changes in several factors, including socially shared temporal rhythms and spatial coordination, sociability of meals, and the ability of cultures to impose norms on cuisine. In order to investigate all, or even most of these aspects of eating, rather comprehensive data sets are needed in which micro-behavioral aspects of everyday life are tracked.

Time-use studies have revealed some general trends such as a decline in the time devoted to cooking. They have also shown that trends in the time spent eating in the home and outside the home vary from country to country (Warde et al. 2007; Cheng et al. 2007; Mestdag 2005). However, time-use analyses address only a few aspects of eating. For a more comprehensive picture of daily eating patterns in populations, an analysis targeting a wider range of specific and micro-behavioral aspects of the organization of eating is necessary. To investigate how patterns of eating change, data are needed from more than one time point. This chapter presents an analysis of such data stemming from a study with two data collections made 15 years apart.

In the Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, comprehensive population surveys were conducted in 1997 and in 2012. The surveys aimed at documenting and describing as richly as possible the state of eating practices paying special attention to their multidimensionality. Building on 24-h recall studies of the

sort common in nutrition research, both surveys used a questionnaire which focused on details about one day of eating – the day before the interview. The two surveys included representative samples of the 4 populations, in all 4823 respondents in 1997 and 8248 respondents in 2012. In 1997, interviews were conducted by telephone; in 2012 they were web-based (Gronow and Holm 2019).

The analysis was guided by the concept of an *eating system*, which combines the physical, organizational, and sociocultural aspects of eating (Mäkelä et al. 1999; see also Kjærnes et al. 2009; Kjærnes 2001). The eating system consists of three elements: the eating pattern, the meal format, and the social organization of eating. The eating pattern refers to the rhythm and number and types of eating events. Meal format refers to the composition of the main course (center, staple, trimmings, gravy, dressings) and the sequence of the meal in terms of starter, main course, and dessert. The social organization of eating relates to the venue of the meal, commensal partners, the specific organization of the event, and who cooked the meal (see Mäkelä et al. 1999; Kjærnes 2001). In all these dimensions, eating events can be more or less complex or developed. At one end of the scale, there might be a snack consisting of a single food item, or perhaps a bite, eaten alone in a nonformal setting – say, driving the car. At the other end of the scale might be a three-course dinner eaten at a dinner table with the whole family and guests. The conceptual framework provided by the notion of an eating system is useful for understanding eating as a whole in which various dimensions operate together and are dependent on each other.

Survey questionnaires were designed to reflect the basic theoretical concept of the eating system. The main part of the questionnaire focused in chronological order on respondents' eating events the day before the interview (see Fig. 1). The maximum allowed was 10 events in 1997 and 13 in 2012, but no one had eaten so many times. The questions focused on the time of eating and the structure of meals (whether they were hot or cold, the number and types of courses) and on the foods and dishes eaten. Cold eating events were recorded on a list of food options, and hot eating events in terms of number of courses and the contents of the center, staples, vegetables, and trimmings in the main course. In both types of events, drinks were registered based on a list of options. In the analysis, meals were reconstructed on the basis of timing and character of events (breakfast the first event, lunch events taking place between 11 am and 2 pm, dinners between country-specific time spans). Foods eaten were registered at a generic level, not in specific detail. Thus, distinctions were made between “steak or roast meat,” “minced meat,” and “meat mixed with other ingredients,” but not between beef, pork, or lamb. Neither were different species of fish registered, just as pasta was registered without distinction between “spaghetti” and “penne.” Vegetables were recorded based on a list of options (e.g., tomato, lettuces, carrot, cabbages, “frozen/fresh green beans, peas”). Accordingly, the data is open for analysis of basic and underlying structures of the food culture, but do not allow for a detailed analysis of changes in relative positions or distinctions between specific products or brands.

The questionnaires also addressed the social context and conduct of the meal, including who cooked the meal, where the eating took place, the company present,

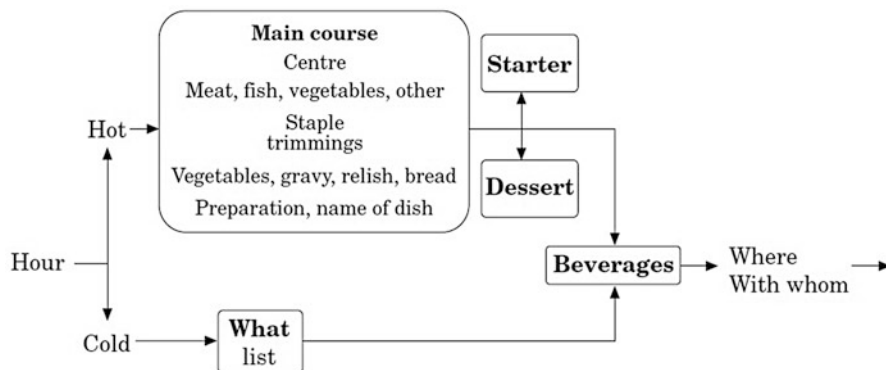


Fig. 1 The construction of meal formats

the duration, the seating arrangements for eating events, and finally whether other activities, like reading or watching the TV, took place while eating. In the 2012 study, respondents were also asked to categorize each eating event as a type of meal (breakfast, lunch, dinner, late evening meal, in-between, other). Questions about specific eating events on the previous day were followed by enquiries about the respondents' sociodemographic backgrounds and their attitudes to food and eating-related issues such as healthy eating habits, experiences of food deprivation, and sustainable food consumption. In both years, interviews were conducted within a fixed time frame at the end of April with no national holidays.

Changes in Everyday Eating in Nordic Countries

The Food: Underlying Traits Are Stable

When looking at the display of food products in supermarkets and various ready-to-eat outlets, the supply of foods in modern societies seems to represent enormous variation and rapid change. New products keep appearing, and new dietary regimes, fashions, and fads follow one after the other. But when looking over a period of 15 years, which changes are discernible in the kinds of foods Nordic populations eat? Are trends of globalization and de-traditionalization visible? Overall, looking at the kinds of foods eaten in the Nordic countries in the period from 1997 to 2012, there is both stability and change (Holm et al. 2015). The general frame is stable, with simple breakfasts, two distinctly different national lunch cultures, and simple hot meals. Between 50% and 80% of breakfasts contained only one food element, typically open sandwiches, bread with a simple topping, which were eaten by between 58% and 78% of populations. The next most typical food category, cereals, was eaten by 15–20%. Coffee or tea was drunk by between half and three quarters of populations.

Lunches appeared in two distinctly different versions in 1997, and this had not changed 15 years later. Whereas most Danish and Norwegian lunches were cold meals, typically consisting of open sandwiches (70–80% in both years), Finnish and Swedish lunches were quite frequently hot dishes (in both years more than 60% of the respondents in those countries had hot lunches). These markedly different lunch cultures are the result of historical trends which are upheld through quite different institutional arrangements around lunch. Whereas in Finland and Sweden, welfare policies are in place to ensure that children are served free hot school lunches every day and adults are given access to hot meals in workplace canteens or in commercial restaurants at affordable prices, provisioning of lunch for children and adults is a private matter in both Denmark and Norway. Children bring lunch packs prepared at home to school, and so do most adults. The typical and classical content of such lunch boxes is sandwiches.

Nordic hot meals remain quite simple, as “platefuls” (Murcott 1982). Dinners are one-course meals, typically, and meat is a dominant center, often minced meat, this is eaten by more than half of populations in both years. In all countries, dishes were recurrently eaten which belonged to Nordic and Scandinavian food traditions, such as an almost iconic comfort dish “Pyttipanna/biksemad” which is a bubble and squeak-type dish reportedly eaten in all four countries. Meatballs were another classic in all four countries and fish balls in Norway and Denmark. In each country, specific dishes were frequently eaten which belong to the typical culinary culture of the respective countries, such as mock hare meatloaf in Denmark, liver casserole in Finland, potato dumpling with sausage and salted meat in Norway, and pea soup with mustard in Sweden. Such stable elements suggest that the categories of foods eaten by Nordic populations have not changed much. They also demonstrate that nationally distinct patterns of eating persist and resist globalizing trends.

There are, though, discernable changes, which point toward other types of developments. In all types of meals, there were minor changes in terms of the relative significance of various food items (e.g., porridge for breakfast decreasing in Finland but slightly increasing in Sweden). The most prominent and systematic changes across the four countries were related to dairy products, drinks, and fruit and vegetables. Milk drinking decreased quite markedly in all countries. Thus, at breakfasts milk decreased in Norway and Sweden (from 48% to 28% and 26% to 15%, respectively), at lunches it decreased with 10% points in all countries, and for dinners it decreased from 16% to 10% in Denmark, 52% to 38% in Finland, 7% to 4% in Norway, and 28% to 17% in Sweden. Milk is thus no longer the core drink at Nordic meals. Instead, water has taken the dominant position and was in 2012 drunk with half or more of all lunches and dinners and increasingly also at breakfasts. Yet, at the same time, yoghurt became a more popular element of breakfasts and was in 2012 eaten at 20–30% of breakfasts. Another key change is the appearance in 2012 of vegetables and fruit at meals at which they would typically not be included in 1997. Thus, in Denmark, fruit was hardly ever eaten at breakfast in 1997 but was included in 14% of breakfasts in 2012. In all countries except Finland, there was a sharp increase in fruit eaten at “in-between” eating events. Further, in both Denmark and Norway, vegetables were increasingly part

of the cold lunches, often in the form of a salad. Even though meat has continued to dominate at dinners, dishes with vegetables as the main component or center increased in all countries.

Taken together, the study shows that despite a constant flux of new products and brands on the market, the underlying traits of Nordic food culture remain relatively stable. Populations in the four countries continue to compose their meals according to the same basic principles of simple meals and platefuls. At the same time, though, a clear trend of shifts in how dairy products are consumed is evident, and there has been a marked increase in the place of fruit and vegetables in eating patterns. The emergence of these foods at breakfasts and in-betweens and as centers at hot meals may reflect an uptake of messages from public health authorities which in recent decades have promoted increasing the consumption of fruit and vegetables. Thus, while stability is a prevailing characteristic of the foods that make up the Nordic diets, new cultural trends are also emerging. It should be noted, however, that our data does not include information about spices or the origin of products. Thus, the minced meat dishes of 2012 may have different and more exotic flavors than earlier, and they may not have been produced from scratch in households and were perhaps instead purchased in more or less ready-to-eat versions. Burgers may have a flavor of globalization or McDonaldization but can also be seen as a slightly altered version of the traditional Nordic meatballs. These aspects of changing food patterns are not revealed by the study method.

The Rhythm: Distinct and Enduring National Patterns

At society level, eating at regular hours indicates social coordination and shared meal conventions. In contrast, an anomic situation with individualization and eroding meals would appear as a lack of distinct social patterns in the timing of eating. In order to get an overview of the daily patterns of eating, all eating events were compiled for each hour of the day.

Figure 2 shows the daily rhythms of eating events on weekdays in the four Nordic countries in 1997 and in 2012. The figure shows that in both 1997 and 2012 and in all four countries, there were clear and marked peak hours during which many people had eaten, and there were quieter hours when eating was rare. The first peak, which was assumed to be breakfast, occurred at 7–8 am in all four countries, with smaller peaks 1 h earlier (6–7 am) and 1 h later (8–9 am), and again at 9–10 am. The second major peak occurred around lunchtime and was more distinctive than the morning peaks of eating. The typical lunch hour in Finland and Norway was 11 am–12 pm; approximately 40% of respondents were found to have eaten during this time, while in Denmark and Sweden lunches were a bit later, typically at 12–1 pm, a time when approximately 50% in Denmark and in Sweden over 40% had eaten. The patterns of eating in the afternoon and evening show that eating was more spread out, and national patterns differed more. Still, in Denmark there was a very sharp peak at 6–7 pm, similar to the peak at lunchtime, when almost 50% of respondents in 1997, and over 40% in 2012, reported to have eaten something.

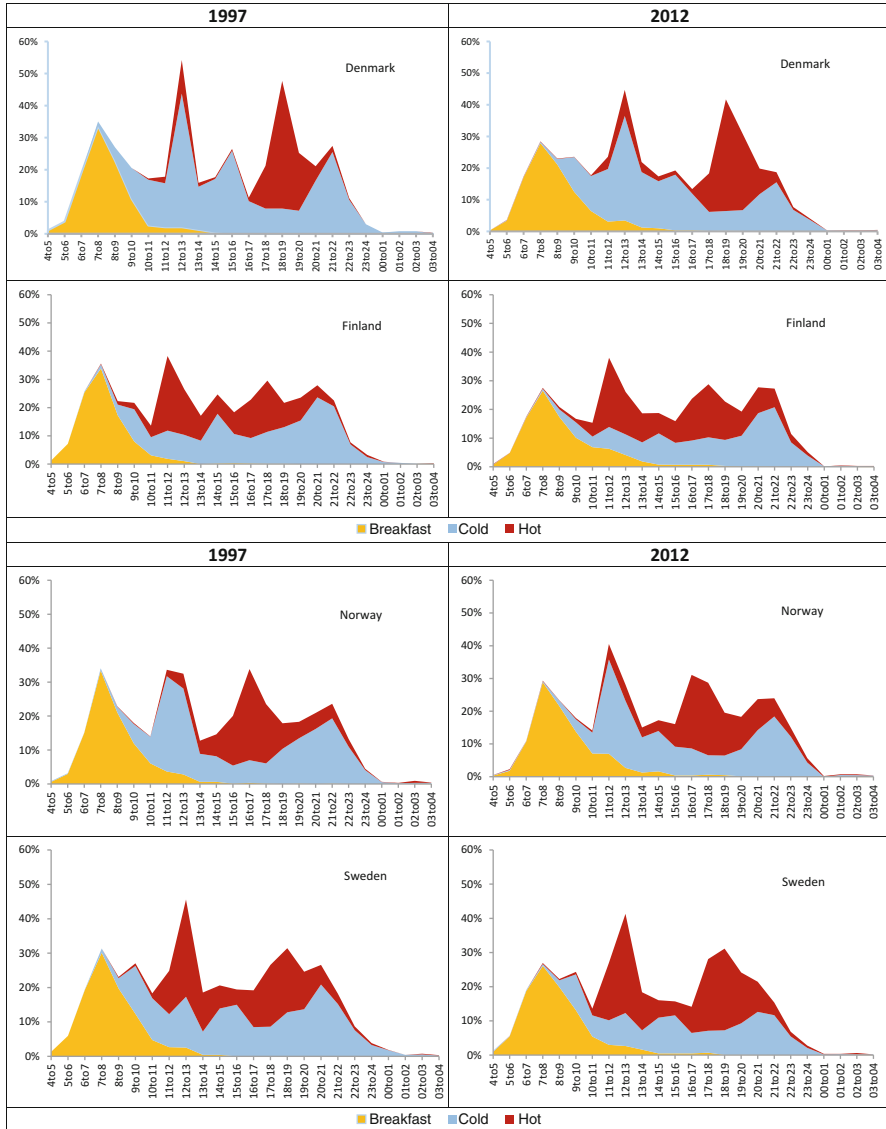


Fig. 2 The daily rhythm of eating in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. 1997 and 2012. Percent of population eating either breakfast (first eating event), cold or hot food at all hours of the day

In the other Nordic countries, peaks were less distinct from the midafternoon onward. One possible explanation for these patterns is that work hours most likely shape daily eating schedules substantially during the first part of the day, while they are less constraining later in the day and in the evening (cf. Rotenberg 1981; Southerton et al. 2012).

Figure 2 also shows marked differences between the countries in terms of the relationship between hot and cold eating events. In Finland and Sweden, there were two peak hours where many people ate hot food, a major peak in the middle of the day around lunchtime and one less distinct later in the day where in both countries hot eating events spread out from the late afternoon until the evening. In Denmark and Norway, on the other hand, there were only one peak hour with hot food, in Norway in the late afternoon (16–17 h) and in Denmark in the early evening (18–19 h). The two different patterns reflect the distinct traditions that were described above with cold lunches consisting of sandwiches in Denmark and Norway and hot lunches in Finland and Sweden with full hot meals.

In all countries, changes in the daily rhythms of eating between 1997 and 2012 were minor, but some were quite systematic. The early morning peaks between 7 and 8 am flattened somewhat out in all four countries and so did the lunch hour peaks between 12 pm and 1 pm in Denmark and in Sweden, while the lunch hour peak in Norway, between 11 am and 12 pm, rose a little. Other small changes were not systematic and differed between countries. This stability also showed in the almost negligible changes in the average number of eating events per day. In both 1997 and 2012, the most common pattern in all of the four countries was to eat three or four times a day (Lund and Gronow 2014). The patterns of eating displayed in Fig. 2 corresponded with the three-meal pattern (breakfast, lunch, dinner, with or without a snack break) identified as typical in industrial societies and found in recent European time-use studies (Rotenberg 1981; Mestdag 2005; Southerton et al. 2012). It seems then that this daily pattern is still a collective anchor point in this region – a pattern that most people adhere to and common even among those who are not in regular employment (see also below).

However, a deviant pattern was identified which was quite similar across the four countries but unsynchronized with each of the dominant national eating patterns. In this pattern, the eating day started later in the day, for many around lunchtime between 11 and 14 h, and the average number of meals was smaller than for the rest of the populations, only 2.9 (Lund and Gronow 2014). The study showed that there was a systematic increase in the unsynchronized patterns from 1997 to 2012. Thus, the shares rose with approximately 5% points in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden and almost doubled in Finland from 12% to 25%. Neither social class nor household income or education explained unsynchronized eating, but across all countries, this was systematically linked to life course and daily life organization, especially with respect to work. Thus, young people living alone more frequently ate in accordance with the unsynchronized pattern, and this pattern was more frequent on weekend days – or on weekdays for respondents who had a day off and among people who were unemployed (Lund and Gronow 2014). Based on the existing data, it is difficult to decide whether the rise in unsynchronized eating is indicative of a general change based on new eating patterns among young people, which will spread to the succeeding generations, or is, instead, linked to specific life situations and life phases that most likely will remain relatively constant over time. Still, the general influence of institutional time rhythms, such as that of the working day, suggests that collectively shared eating rhythms are likely to persist.

The Social Context: Stable but Changes in the Codes of Conduct

Commensality, i.e., the practice of eating together with other people at the same table, is regarded as one of the key characteristics of human sociability (Fischler 2011). While commensality is highly valued in all food cultures, the discourses around individualization and de-structuration have brought moral concerns about the demise of shared, social meals and about the loosening of social norms regarding the social conduct and context of eating (Murcott 1997; Sobal and Nelson 2003; Mestdag 2005; Mäkelä 2009; Giacomani 2016). These concerns are most prevalent in discussions about the alleged demise of family meals – typically eaten at home – as the archetype of commensality (e.g., Mestdag 2005; Julier 2013). Such worries have been accentuated by public health and nutrition studies suggesting that shared meals are important in socializing children and adolescents into healthy eating habits (e.g., Larson et al. 2013) and preventing them from adopting other unhealthy patterns, such as smoking or drinking alcohol. Consequently, also public health education today strongly encourages families to eat together.

Based on the results on Nordic eating patterns, however, concerns about the erosion of commensal eating in terms of home eating and eating with others seem to be somewhat overrated (Holm et al. 2016). Figure 3 shows three aspects of the social context of meals, namely, location, company, and duration. The figure suggests that the changes in social context and commensality from 1997 to 2012 were mostly moderate. In Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (Finland was not included in these analyses), the respondents ate more than two thirds of their meals at home. During the time period under study, the share of home meals declined by a few percentage points at most (from 75% to 71% in Denmark, from 74% to 72% in Norway, and from 73% to 72% in Sweden). When eating elsewhere, eating at work or in school dominated (12–15% of meals in 1997 and 14–16% in 2012). Only in Denmark did the share of work/school meals increase markedly (from 12% to 16% of all meals). At most 10% of meals were eaten in other places than this in both years; of these about half were eaten in someone else's home. Few meals were eaten in cafes/restaurants (2–5% in 1997 and 3–6% in 2012) on the day before the interview.

The share of meals eaten alone increased somewhat in Denmark (from 33% in 1997 to 38% in 2012) and Norway (from 36% to 41%), but not in Sweden (37% and 36%). In all countries, family members were in both years present in nearly half of all meals. In Denmark, the share of family meals declined somewhat (from 50% to 43%), while the share remained stable in Norway (43% and 42%) and increased in Sweden (from 41% to 46%). In both years, more meals were eaten with social company than alone in all three countries, although in Norway the difference between alone and shared meals was only 1% point. In total, around every fifth meal was eaten with colleagues, friends, or others in both years in all three countries.

While both the location and company at meals remained relatively stable over the 15-year time period, larger changes took place in meal duration, accompanying activities, and seating arrangements. Figure 3 shows that the proportion of very

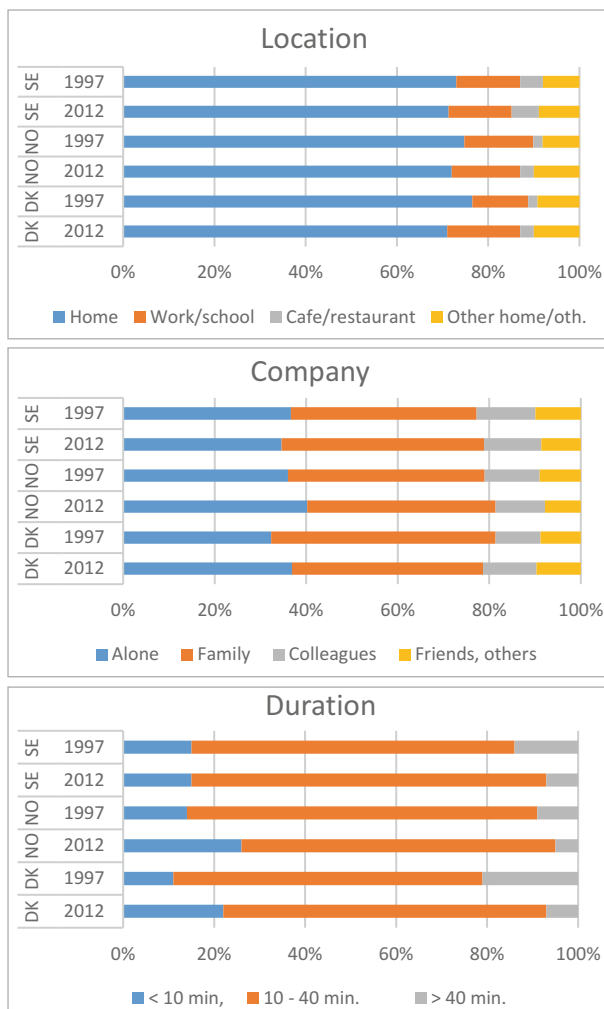


Fig. 3 The social context of eating during the day before: location, social company and duration of meals in 1997 and 2012

short meals, eaten in less than 10 min, increased considerably in both Denmark (from 11% to 22%) and Norway (from 14% to 26%). In Sweden, such short meals remained at a stable level (15% in both years). At the same time, very lengthy meals taking more than 40 min became less common in all three countries; only about 1 in 20 meals was that long in 2012. In addition, there were some indications of informalization, with more accompanying activities during meals (figures not shown). In all three countries, people increasingly watched the television while eating; in 2012, around one third of meals included television watching. Meanwhile, listening to the radio declined considerably from more than 20% to 10–14%, while

reading remained at around 12–14%. Computers, tablets, or smartphones were not included in the 1997 study, but in 2012, they were used in a little less than one in seven meals (13–14% in all three countries). Furthermore, it seems that more often than earlier do Nordic people eat sitting at sofa or coffee tables rather than at kitchen or dining tables (no figure/table). The accustomed manner of eating at kitchen or dinner tables declined overall from around two thirds in 1997 to a little more than half of meals in 2012. At the same time, roughly a third of meals – with some country variation – were eaten at coffee or sofa tables (an increase from 23% to 30% in Denmark, from 31% to 40% in Norway, and from 19% to 28% in Sweden).

Such trends were to some extent associated with demographic factors, albeit somewhat differently so in the three countries (see Holm et al. 2016 for details). Here we report sociodemographic differences common in all three countries. First, regression analyses showed, not surprisingly, that eating meals alone was explained primarily by living alone. Living alone was also associated with eating meals elsewhere than kitchen or dining tables while watching television and using a computer, tablet, or smartphone. The younger the respondent, the more likely he or she was to eat very short meals, watch the television, and use a computer, tablet, or smartphone while eating. In addition, women were more likely than men to eat very short meals, and those with tertiary education were more prone to eat with computers, tablets, or smartphones than those with secondary education.

Logistic generalized estimating equations conducted for all four countries for the 2012 data (including Finland) showed that informal eating arrangements were in all countries more prevalent at breakfast and in-between meals and less so for dinners. Eating alone was quite usual for all types of meals except for dinner. Dinner thus seems to have most persistently kept its commensal character, while norms of commensality seem to be loosening for other meals.

Based on these observations, we conclude that hardly any delocalization took place, since most meals were eaten at home in both years. Individualizing tendencies were primarily related to the slightly increasing trend of eating alone. The most substantial transformation seems to have occurred in informalization. Compared to the late 1990s, Nordic people in the 2010s ate more quickly and engaged in other activities while eating – watched television, used the computer, etc. – and they more often enjoyed their meals informally on the sofa, for instance, instead of at kitchen or dining tables.

Eating Out: Modest with Remaining National Traits

The figures above indicate that eating out in cafés and restaurants does not have a prominent position in everyday eating in the Nordic countries. Yet, eating out may still be a regular phenomenon, and changes in such practices may inform us on the modernization of Nordic eating. The two surveys included not only questions about the venues of eating during the day before but also about the frequency of eating out in a restaurant or a café during the previous year.

The results on eating out add information on both similarities and differences between the four countries in the social organization of eating. In general, eating out seems quite infrequent. Figure 4 shows that in all four countries, only a small minority regularly ate out in terms of doing so weekly or more often. This was the case in all four countries. However, there was some disparity in the trends. Whereas eating out at least once a week in Denmark and Norway remained very low over the 15-year period, the figures were somewhat higher and showed an increasing trend in Finland and remained stable and somewhat higher in Sweden. In both years, a large majority (around 80%) had eaten out at least once during the previous year. However, while a trend of more people eating out once or several times a month was found in Finland and Sweden, this was not the case in Denmark and Norway. This means that in 2012, while 35% in Denmark and 45% in Norway ate out monthly or more often, the proportions were 55% in Finland and 61% in Sweden. Yet, the proportion of people eating out very rarely or never remained low, below 10%, in all four countries (Lund et al. 2017).

Further analyses of eating out in 2012 indicate that these divergences may, at least in part, be connected to different patterns of eating at work. In Finland and Sweden, a larger share of the meals eaten at a restaurant or a café on the day before the interview was eaten with colleagues (26% and 30%, respectively), while these proportions were lower in Denmark and Norway (12 and 20%, respectively) (see Lund et al. 2017). The difference can probably be explained by the different role of lunch in overall eating patterns in Finland and Sweden compared to Denmark and Norway. A hot meal away from home requires some kind of food service, either in a canteen or in a commercial venue. Meanwhile, in Denmark as many as 39% of the meals eaten at a restaurant or café were eaten with friends, a much larger share than in the other countries, in which the share was between 22% and 29%. In Finland, it was more typical than in the other countries

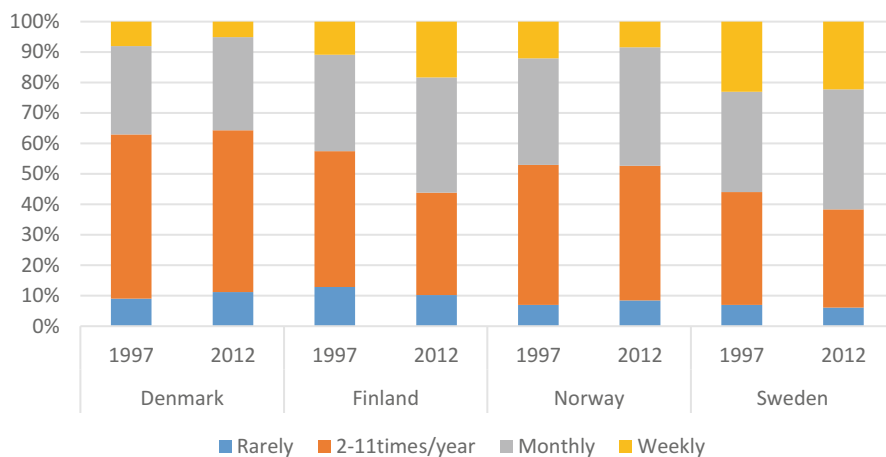


Fig. 4 The frequency of eating out in restaurants and cafés in four Nordic countries in 1997 and 2012

to eat alone in a restaurant or a café (21% in Finland compared to 7% in Denmark, 13% in Norway, and 14% in Sweden).

In all countries, living in urban surroundings increased the propensity to eat out. This is not very surprising, considering that while large cities offer easy access to a large variety of venues, this is much more limited in less densely populated areas. Eating out is a matter of social stratification, too. In Sweden and Norway, higher education was associated with the frequency of eating out, and in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, the higher salariat, i.e., higher managers or professionals and large employers, more frequently ate out than others did. However, it should be noted that the analysis did not capture more fine-grained distinctions between different types of venues, which do range from top-end restaurants to fast-food outlets.

All in all, eating out in cafes and restaurants seems to represent an occasional element of Nordic eating patterns. It is hard to draw any strong conclusion when it comes to trends, but there are few signs of eating out increasingly replacing everyday eating at home. The limited increase is somewhat surprising, considering that income levels have increased in the Nordic countries during this 15-year period and emphasize the persistence of home-centered food cultures in this region.

Conclusion: No Strong Evidence of De-traditionalization and Dissolution

The empirical data from the two surveys clearly indicate socially shared eating patterns in each of the four Nordic countries. These patterns have remained surprisingly stable since the late 1990s. Therefore, in this region there is no strong evidence of the alleged dissolution and individualization of traditional meal patterns. Nor are there any strong trend of homogenization across countries in terms of how eating is organized. The general picture is one of stability in parallel with some elements of change.

Eating rhythms show clear national patterns. There were nation-specific collective daily time peaks at which meals were eaten by a great number of people in each of the four countries, with hardly any changes in the timing of eating over the 15 years. The pattern of having three to four meals per day, which corresponds well with the three-meal pattern identified as the predominant schedule of daily eating in industrialized societies, appears to have remained relatively unchanged. During the first part of the day, the rhythm of eating was quite similar in all four countries, including a morning meal (breakfast) and a midday meal (lunch). This corresponds well with Nordic work hours. After work – roughly speaking, when eating is less limited by the institutionalized structures of the working day – distinct national traditions emerged, even here remaining stable. Deviant practices, socially unsynchronized eating, were identified in all four countries, increasing slightly between 1997 and 2012. Judged from demographic variations, this pattern is most likely a transient phenomenon that reflects the life course of the respondents, and not an emerging de-structuring of eating rhythms.

The localization and social company of daily eating also remained relatively unchanged. Eating took place primarily in the home, plus in the workplace during work hours (for those employed). Accordingly, family and colleagues were the most frequent eating companions. In everyday life, eating rarely took place in restaurants, cafés, and the like, though this was very slightly increasing over the 15-year period. In the Nordic countries, visiting people in their homes or having guests over for meals appears to be the preferred way of socializing around meals with people who do not belong to the household. This is unlike, for example, British patterns, where eating out has been more widespread since the 1990s (Warde et al. 1999). Eating alone was frequent, too, with a modest increase over the 15 years, most likely reflecting the growing number of single-person households in the Nordic countries. The overall picture is then that while eating alone was quite common, social eating within the context of the home was still a stable and dominant part of contemporary eating patterns and the practice of family meals remained remarkably unchanged.

While supermarket shelves demonstrate considerable changes in the food items on offer in the Nordic countries, there was remarkable stability with respect to the categories of foods eaten in 1997 and 2012. Meat has a dominant position in dinner dishes, with some national variation. Our data do not, however, tell much about the character of the food items or the extent of home cooking. Meal formats of both hot lunches and dinners as “platefuls” are rather simple, very far from the complex meals presented as the ideal in, e.g., French studies Poulain (2017). Cold meals are even simpler. This was evident in both years. Despite these shared features, it seems that the core elements in traditional Nordic national food cultures persist. While Danes and Norwegians tend to eat their lunches cold, Finns and Swedes maintain a food culture with hot, cooked lunches. The institutional arrangements supporting the hot lunches in schools and workplaces in Finland and Sweden are probably strong stabilizing factors behind this finding and linked to normative expectations. In these two countries, more people eat out at cafés and restaurants during the day, and the timing of dinner is somewhat more flexible, compared to Denmark and Norway. Further, there is a higher frequency of skipping dinner in Finland and Sweden and a lower frequency of family meals among employed persons – one reason perhaps being that they already had a cooked meal at lunchtime.

Taken together, while we do see persistent and distinct national patterns, the picture is not uniform across social groups within each of the countries. Many of these variations are straightforward and relate to the evident impact of everyday life arrangements. Thus, people who were employed or undergoing education ate more often with colleagues or schoolmates, and people who lived alone ate alone more frequently and also tended to eat in a manner signaling informal codes of conduct. Many differences relate to life phase as reflected in age and household organization. Young people were the most likely to engage in brief eating events, eat in front of the TV or computer, and eat in an unsynchronized manner. It remains to be seen whether they will keep on doing so when they get older and have their own families and children.

Markers of social distinction were infrequent and somewhat scattered in our study. Fuller and more specific analyses of sociocultural differences in eating

patterns are likely to demand different kinds of data: more detailed information on foods and dishes eaten, the prices of foods purchased, and more information on preferences. Considering the basic elements of eating patterns addressed in this study, social distinctions do not appear to be very important. Social and economic differences did, however, emerge clearly in issues directly related to economic resources, such as eating out (Lund et al. 2017) or being food insecure (Borch and Kjærnes 2016). Taken together, changes in eating patterns draw a double-sided picture: on the one hand, Nordic food cultures are evolving and becoming more similar in terms of what people eat and drink for daily meals as well as in terms of informalization of eating. On the other hand, the Nordic countries have hardly absorbed supposedly global developments in patterns of eating, such as more eating out and less eating at home. The stable number and composition of eating events indicates that frequent snacking is rarely replacing a pattern of ordinary meals. Contemporary Nordic meals are rapid and simple, but they are still “meals” in terms of timing and social organization.

The Nordic countries share many features of postindustrial societies in terms of everyday life as well as food provisioning; households are small, with most women and men being employed outside the home; welfare systems ensure a relatively low level of social and economic exclusion; and supermarket food distribution dominates completely, with high proportions of convenience food and ready-made dishes. Yet, as witnessed by this study, eating patterns have remained relatively stable, also retaining some key nationally characteristic features. Not only that, these national distinctions seem to be sustained by modern institutions, as demonstrated by the organization of lunch in the four countries. In most households, strong norms of eating together at home in the evening also seem to have survived the significant transformation of family and work life over the last decade.

Still, eating may change in ways that are not recorded in the type and level of data we have used here. Dilemmas of limited time for household chores seem, for example, to have been solved by a gradual transition from home cooking to industrial processing, as indicated by both sales data and time-use studies. This way, societal rules and norms of the social organization of eating seem to be upheld, to a certain extent, even in terms of the categories of foods and dishes. This does not preclude significant modifications at the food commodity level. Here, we have based our discussion on data, which allow us to conclude that in spite of the rapid changes, which are easily observable in supermarkets and in food marketing, the basic structures and patterns of eating change at a much slower pace and within specific local, normative, and institutional contexts.

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