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The Comfort of Bowl Food

From the royal wedding to your dining room, everyone's serving meals in bowls. What does it mean about the way we eat now?

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A good rule for modern eating seems to be: When in doubt, put it in a bowl. Gone are the days when bowls were used only for soup or cereal. These days, we put all manner of things in bowls that once had no place there, from poached eggs to smoothies. Even Prince Harry and Megan Markle chose to offer breakfast food to guests at their wedding in bowls rather than on plates.

“Bowl food,” as it is called on Instagram, has been around for a few years now. In 2016, Ellen Byron reported in the Journal that American consumers had started buying multiple 68-ounce serving dishes and using them to eat out of. Capacious bowls feel like the right container for the Asian-oriented dishes that many of us now prefer, not to mention pasta. Most nights, I ask one of my children to lay the table for dinner, and I’ve lost track of how often I’ve said, “I think we need spoons not knives.” From risotto to pho, our favorite dishes demand bowls, and bowls demand spoons.

As the Journal article noted, the bowl trend gained strength in parallel with the craze for wellness. A “wellness bowl,” also known as a Buddha bowl, reassures the eater that they have all their nutritional bases covered. The ingredients are all visible, one after another, like bullet points on a to-do list: tofu, green vegetables, quinoa, some kind of obscure seeds. Food stylists say that bowls make health foods more photogenic than they would be on a plate, because all you can see is the top layer.

In fact, bowls are so beloved now that they are sometimes used for dishes that call for a plate. The British food writer Nigel Slater has complained about the habit in pretentious modern restaurants of “putting every main dish in vast, shallow bowls regardless, as if we were all hungry Labradors.” Mr. Slater rightly points out that it’s almost impossible to eat steak in a bowl, because you need a flat surface on which to cut it. Unlike plate food, which demands cutting, bowl food can be eaten one-handed, leaving the other hand free to flick through a book or scroll through Twitter.

But while most food trends peter out after a year or so, the rise of the bowl feels different. It is starting to look less like a fleeting fashion and more like a lasting shift in manners, away from the old formal Western cuisine of plates, knives and forks. After all, in much of Asia, eating out of a bowl is already a way of life, whether it is a breakfast of Chinese congee or a dinner of Japanese ramen.

Indeed, for millennia, in the West as well as the East, bowls were the vessel from which ordinary people ate all their meals, because most cooking consisted of some kind of soup or stew or pottage, ladled from a common pot. Sometimes a single wooden bowl and a single spoon would be shared among a whole family, passed from mouth to mouth.

With urbanization and the spread of cheap ceramics in the 19th century, most diners switched from eating off “hollow-ware,” as bowls were known, to an increasingly elaborate range of flatware, such as plates and saucers. The word “flatware” later came to mean not the plate itself but the metal knives and forks used to eat from. With these new plates came different foods and table manners. Entrees became less soupy and more solid than they had been in the old days. Meanwhile, many middle-class diners started to suffer from a condition that has been called “fork anxiety” by the historian Darra Goldstein.

As soon as there was a choice of plates and utensils, some people worried that they would choose the wrong one. Plates, and the etiquette surrounding them, often forced diners to behave in awkward, unnatural ways around food, such as chasing peas with a knife and fork as they skidded on a flat china surface.

Our abandonment of plates for bowls suggests that we are reverting to the simpler times of one-pot cookery, liberating ourselves once and for all from fork anxiety. Today, the thing that we are most short of in the kitchen is not necessarily money but time. Sales of bowls have climbed in tandem with the rise of the Instant Pot and the pressure cooker, time-saving gadgets that produce tasty dishes too sloppy for a plate.

There’s an efficiency to the bowl that can make plates feel cumbersome by comparison. Unlike plate food, which demands cutting, bowl food can be eaten one-handed, leaving the other hand free to flick through a book or scroll through

Still, I suspect that the true appeal of the bowl right now is emotional rather than rational. Alain Coumont, the Belgian founder of the café chain Le Pain Quotidien, which has been at the forefront of the bowl trend, has said that his fondness for bowls comes from childhood memories of visiting his grandmother, who would give him a bowl of hot chocolate that he used to warm his hands. It doesn’t work quite so well when you are cupping your hands around a vegan protein bowl for warmth, but the idea is the same.

Both bowls and spoons have always been associated with children; spoons are the most benign utensils, lacking the sharp edges of a knife or the spikes of a fork. It is from a bowl that most of us take our first gummy mouthfuls of solid food.

The rise of the bowl in our lives suggests that many eaters are in a permanently fragile state, treating every meal as comfort food. In a world of alarming news, maybe we all need something to cradle.