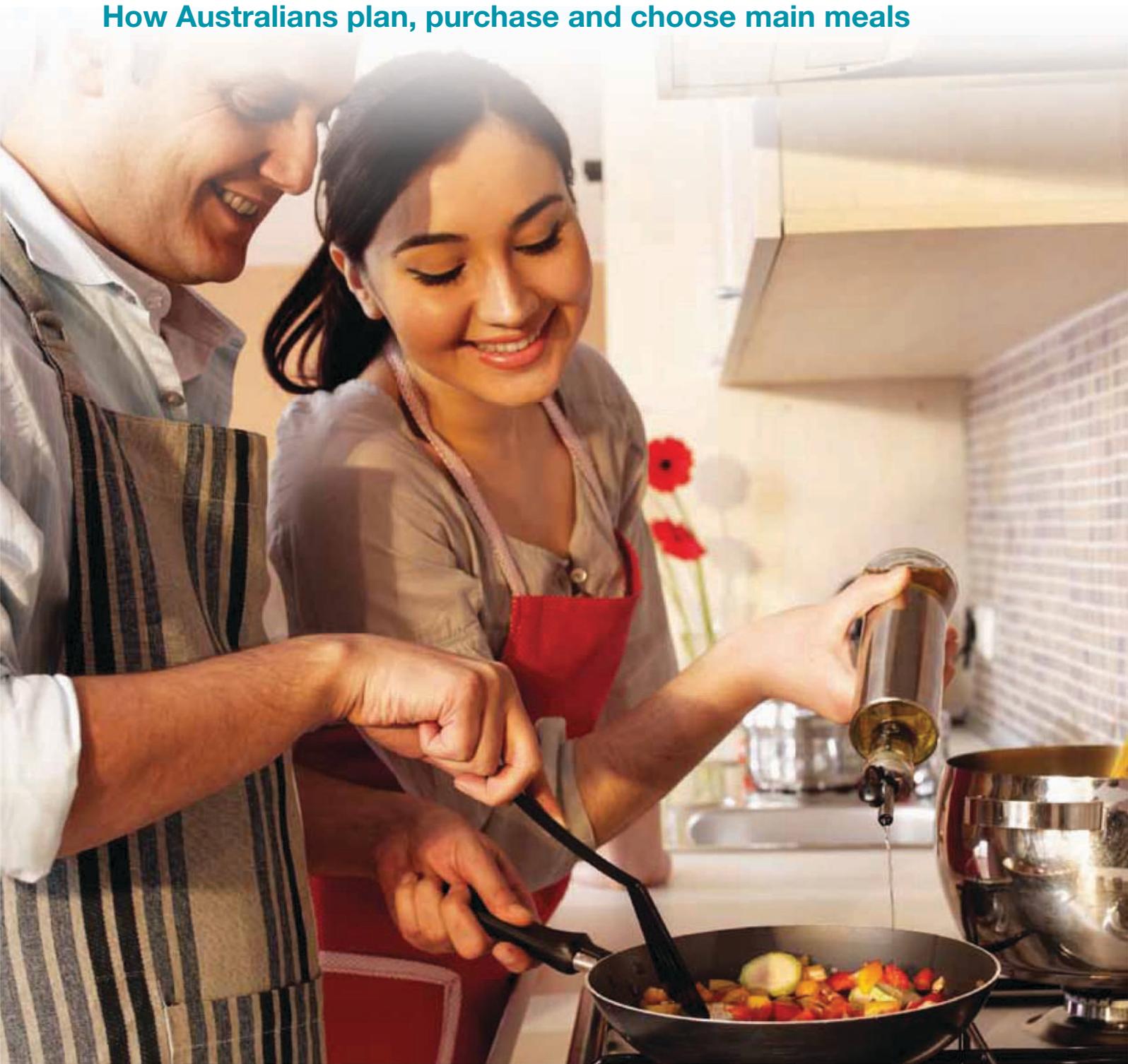


Main Meal Repertoires

How Australians plan, purchase and choose main meals



About the research

Main Meal Repertoires provides an understanding of Australians' main meal repertoires focusing on meals prepared in the home.

This research builds on findings from *Last Night's Dinner*¹, extending our understanding of the main meal, from the meal cooked last night, to the full menu cycle. It covers main meal repertoire size, structure and the influence of planning, purchasing and cooking skills on the repertoire and its healthiness.

To understand how main meal preparers approach planning, preparing and cooking main meals over a weekly or fortnightly period, qualitative research was conducted by researchers from *The Ipsos Mackay Report*. Affinity group discussions and in-depth interviews were conducted in-home from 26 April to 7 May 2010 in Brisbane and Sydney.

A questionnaire was then developed based on these insights by the research and analytics agency, *The Clever Stuff*. An online survey was conducted from 22 to 30 June 2010 amongst 928 main meal preparers. A nationally representative sample was assured by setting interlocking quotas on gender, age, location and income.

The report was written by Rebecca Huntley from *The Ipsos Mackay Report* with input from Professor Tony Worsley, Deakin University.

The research was commissioned by Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA). MLA is a producer-owned company responsible for managing research and development, marketing and communications on behalf of the Australian beef, sheepmeat and goatmeat industries.



1. Meat & Livestock Australia. *Last Night's Dinner – What Australians prepared for dinner last night*, 2009. Available from MLA.

Overview

There is no typical main meal preparer ... page 2

Main meals are being prepared in a wide range of different households in Australia. While mums with children are most likely to be main meal preparers, men appear to be getting more involved.

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The healthiness of a meal is influenced by takeaway frequency, cooking skill and, to a lesser extent, purchasing behaviour. We need to better understand cooking skills required to make a variety of nutritious main meals.



There is no typical main meal preparer

While mums with children are most likely to be main meal preparers, men appear to be getting more involved.

Main meals are being prepared in a wide range of different households in Australia. Almost half of our sample represented households with children, a quarter singles and the remaining, couples.

To better understand how age and life stage influences behaviour and choices around the main meal repertoire, the quantitative findings were segmented into the following categories: young singles; young couples with no children; families with young children under six; families with children between the ages of six and twelve; families with children older than twelve; older couples; and older singles.

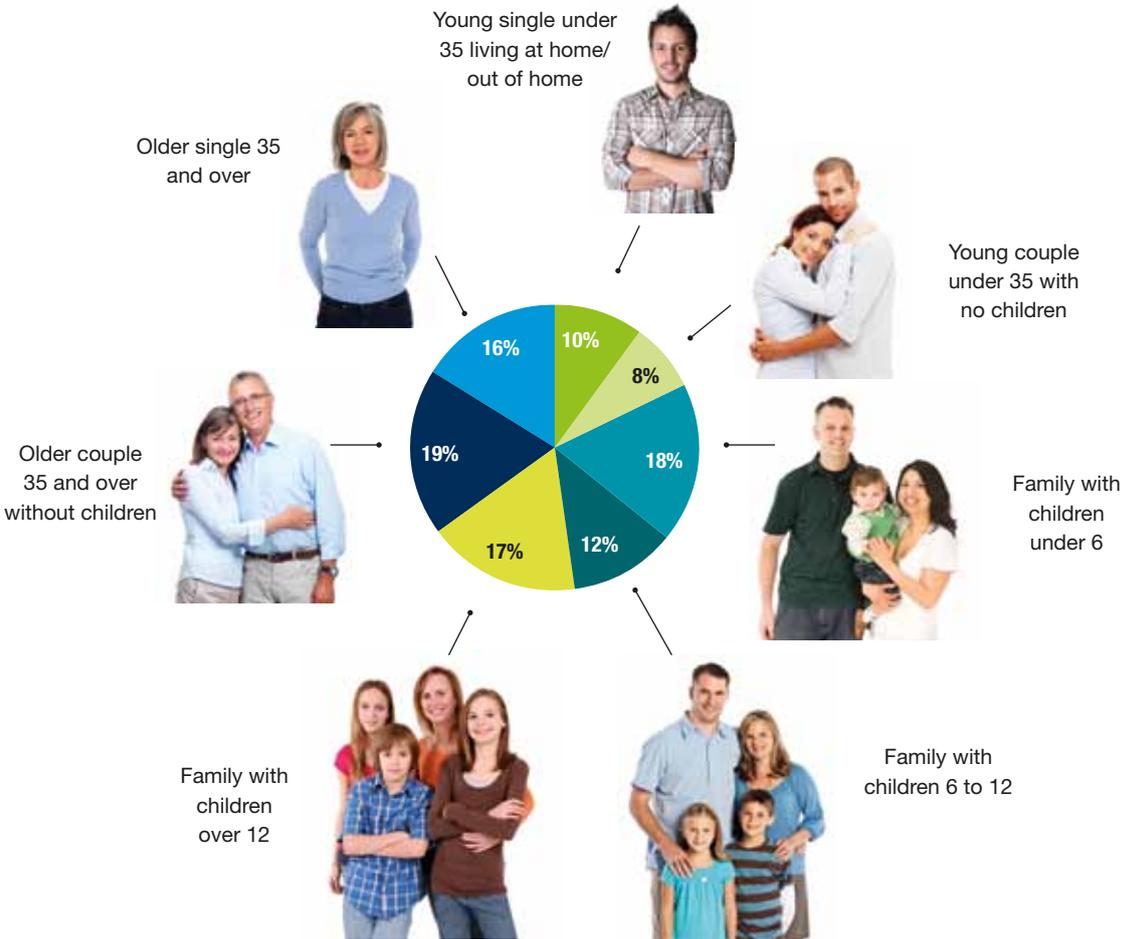
This study indicates a much higher involvement of men in meal preparation compared to our previous research, *Last Night's Dinner*. Although use of different methodologies may explain some of the difference, these latest findings are consistent with trends showing men becoming more active in the kitchen, which has also been reported in other studies.

The qualitative research found that main meal preparation in the home is no longer viewed by our society as merely 'women's work'. It was apparent that men's involvement spans from cooking the meat for the evening meal on the BBQ, to responsibility for cooking meals on the weekend, to being equally responsible for family meals throughout the week.



“We will take turns. If I am working late he will cook.”

Life stage segmentations used in this study



Gender of main meal preparers

Last Night's Dinner survey 2009

n=1,421



Main Meal Repertoire study 2010

n=928



Ipsos Omnibus study 2010

n=1,034



'New' meal planning means there is no typical main meal menu

The general approach to planning is flexible, relying on a staple of meals and ingredients but with ample room for improvisation and variety.

The stereotype of meat and veg three times a week, fish on Fridays and a Sunday roast no longer holds. Rigid and predictable meal plans do not provide the variety and flexibility required by today's main meal preparers.



Weekly meal planning is a rare occurrence today. The majority of main meal preparers, irrespective of age and lifestyle, plan on the day or have a few meals planned a couple of days ahead.

The emphasis is less on strict planning of meals and more on ensuring you have enough ingredients to make whatever dish you have the time or interest to prepare.

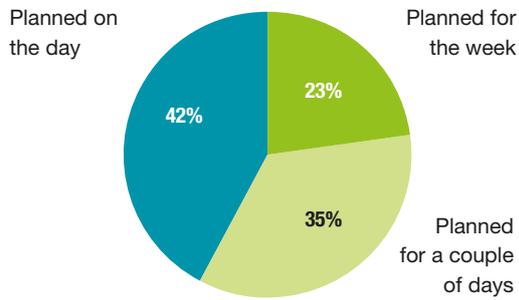
Just over half of all main meal preparers purchase ingredients typically used to make a range of different meals without knowing in advance what they might make with them. A quarter buy staples and then top up on other ingredients as needed. The rest purchase ingredients for a set number of meals.

The desire for flexibility and variety explains this new approach to planning meals. Main meal preparers want the flexibility to create menu plans 'on the hop' leaving them open to respond to food specials and fluctuations in food quality and adapt to changes in household activities and tastes. An overly planned approach is seen to be old fashioned and predictable, thwarting creativity and spontaneity and consequently, variety and interest.

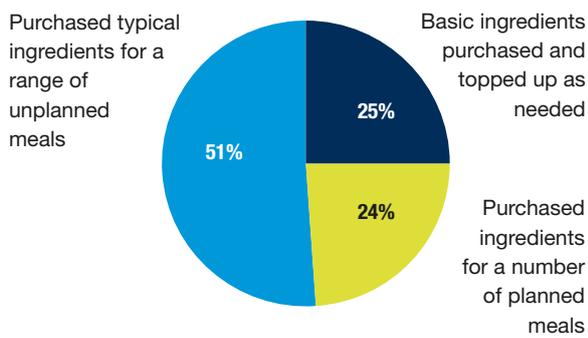
The availability of late opening and 24-hour supermarkets means that main meal preparers don't need to be as organised about cooking as previous generations.

"It's about having at least three varieties of protein and three to four veggies in my fridge and tomato paste, pasta and rice in my cupboard. If I have all these things I'd be right for the week. I could whip up anything."

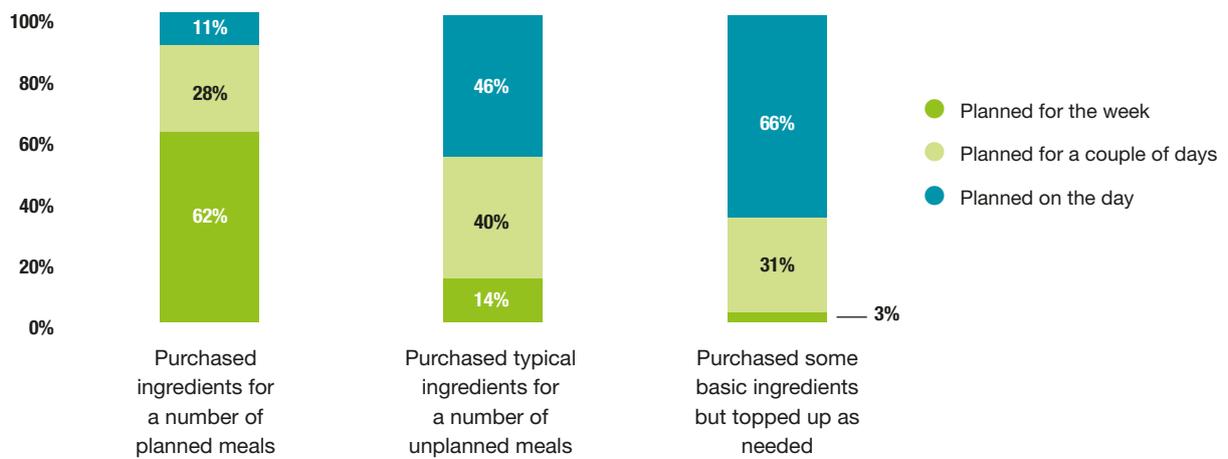
Main meal planning



Main meal ingredient purchasing



Main meal planning by purchasing behaviour



There is a broad range of meals in the main meal repertoire

The number of meals in the main meal repertoire varies from 14 to 46 depending on life stage and lifestyle.

The usual approach to creating a meal is to base it on a particular protein choice and then consider the cooking method. Key proteins around which meals are constructed are beef, chicken, lamb, pork, fish and eggs.

Beef is the most common protein followed by chicken, with slight differences in preference for other proteins across life stages.

Not surprisingly, singles – both young and old – reported preparing the least number of meals. The qualitative research shows that singles feel as if cooking for one is ‘not worth the effort’ and this reluctance contributes to a limited repertoire.

Couples are more likely to have a broader spectrum of meals in their repertoire than singles, while the number of meals in the repertoire peaks when children enter the household. This reflects the desire of main meal preparers to provide their family with variety. The assumption made is that a varied diet is more likely to engage and interest potentially fussy family members and ensure they eat at least one healthy meal a day.

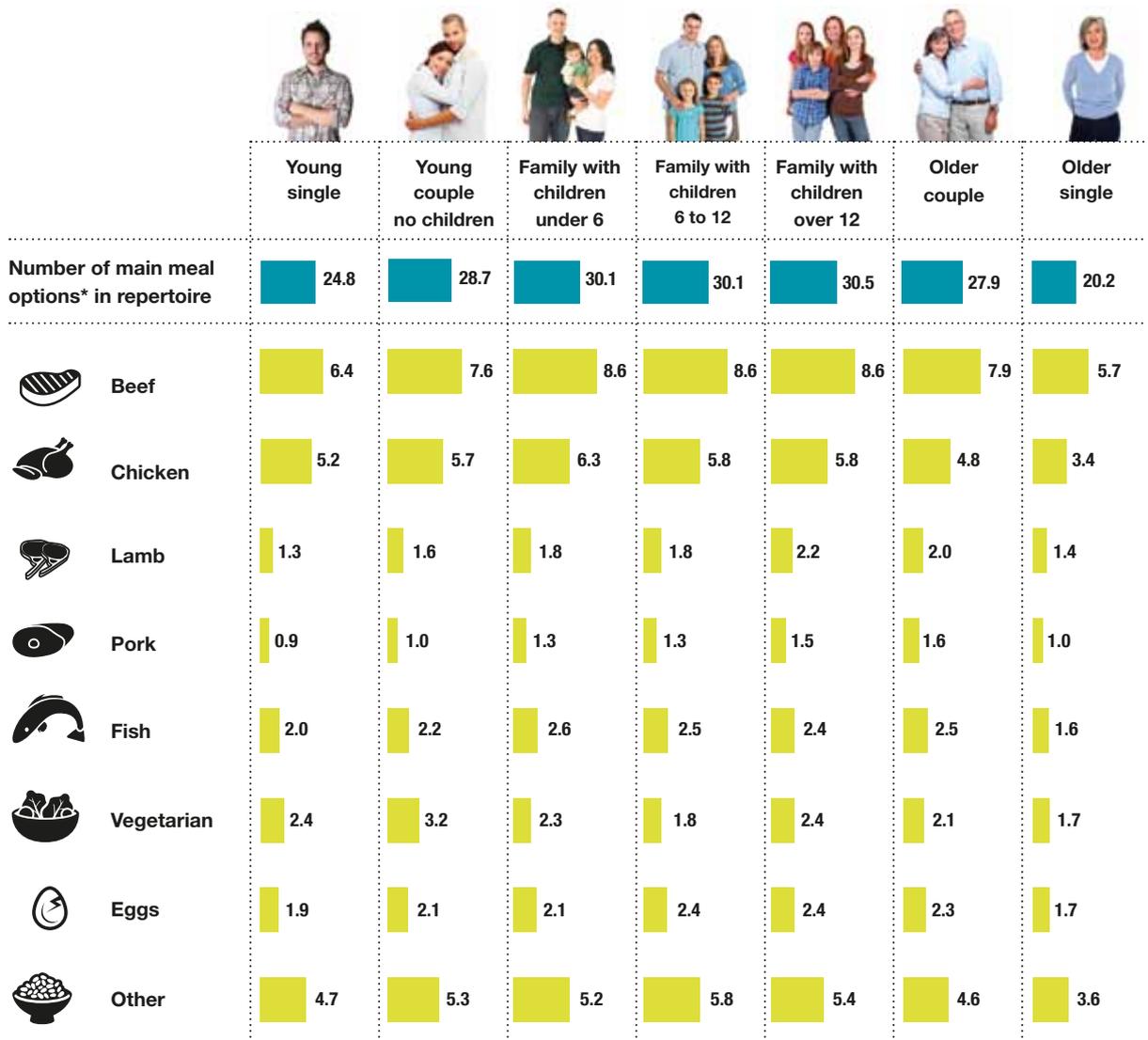
Lifestyle circumstances, particularly income, also influences the number of meals in the repertoire. This is validated by the qualitative research which found main meal preparers on low incomes found cooking on a budget difficult and stressful. The more limited the resources, the more limited the number of meals regularly cooked. Single, older males with a lower income reported the most limited repertoire of 14 meals.

There was little difference in the number of meals in the repertoire of homemakers compared to those in paid employment. However, the qualitative research suggests work commitments are perceived as barriers to trying out new meals. Mums in part-time work and with a partner reported the most varied repertoire at 46 meals.

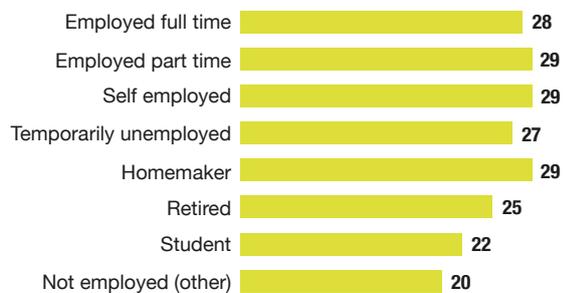


“When you’ve got children you’ve got to think outside the box and come up with things, make sure the children are eating healthy.”

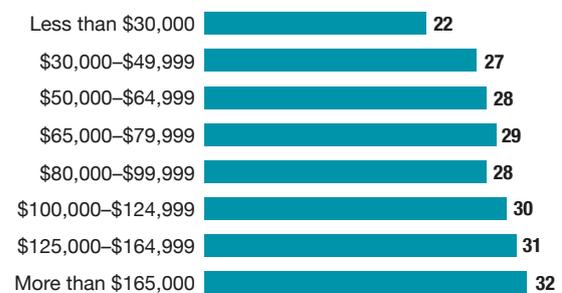
Number of meals in the repertoire



Number of meals* by occupation



Number of meals* by income



* Selected from a list of 80 meal options (based on findings from *Last Night's Dinner*) prepared in the last six months

Some meals are cooked more frequently than others

Although there is no typical repertoire, some meals emerge as weekly favourites and popular ‘stop gaps’.

Most dishes are prepared all year round with predictable seasonal variations. The slow cooker is popular in the winter, the BBQ in the summer, but both are handy out of season.

Main meal preparers tend to vary the protein choice each day. Few people would serve chicken or the same cut of meat two days in a row.

Although there does not appear to be a standard weekly or fortnightly menu cycle, there appears to be a number of favourite meals prepared weekly in conjunction with a variety of different meals prepared to suit occasion and budget.

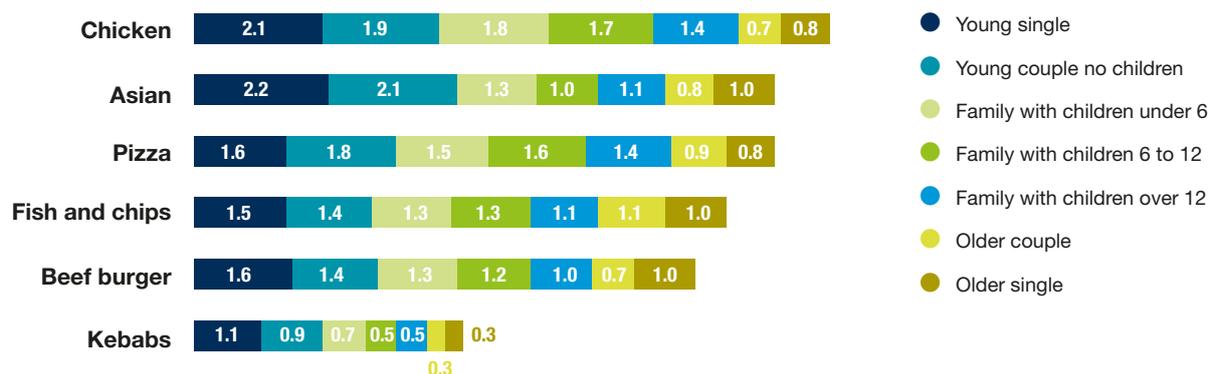
Basic meal options, particularly sandwiches, are popular choices when a ‘proper’ meal isn’t required, something that seems to occur more than once a week for all life stages.



Takeaways and eating out are generally not factored into the repertoire as a regular item. Most main meal preparers report having a takeaway dinner at least once a week and report eating out at least once a month. Males, young singles and couples tend to have takeaways and eat out more often. They are viewed as a treat at the end of the week or an option when there is no time available to prepare a meal.

Chicken is the most frequent takeaway for all life stages except older couples and singles, whose most popular option is fish and chips. Asian take away is more frequent in younger singles and couples.

Frequency of takeaway meals consumed monthly



Frequency of main meal choices

		More than once a week	Weekly	Fortnightly	Monthly
Most popular choice more than once a week					
	Sandwich	50%	29%	12%	8%

Most popular choices weekly

Beef	Spaghetti bolognaise	8%	37%	31%	21%
	Steak	12%	42%	26%	16%
	Sausages	6%	31%	32%	22%
Chicken	Breast	13%	43%	27%	13%
	Stir fry	6%	35%	33%	21%
Eggs	Fried	15%	35%	27%	15%
	Scrambled	15%	30%	27%	20%
	Omelette	12%	31%	29%	21%
Fish	Fillet	7%	32%	31%	20%
Vegetarian	Salad	27%	33%	21%	15%
Other	2-minute noodles	16%	28%	28%	21%

Most popular choices fortnightly

Beef	Casserole	2%	21%	31%	31%
	Burger	4%	18%	35%	31%
	Stir fry	5%	25%	39%	24%
	Rissoles	2%	16%	39%	30%
Chicken	Schnitzel	4%	28%	37%	23%
	Nuggets	8%	28%	31%	24%
Fish	Crumbed/battered	4%	26%	32%	29%
Lamb	Chops	2%	32%	36%	23%
Pork	Chops	3%	27%	35%	26%
Vegetarian	Soup	11%	23%	31%	23%
Other	Asian noodles	9%	24%	33%	24%
	Pizza – meat/seafood	3%	22%	33%	31%
	Wrap	27%	31%	22%	14%

Most popular choices monthly

Beef	Roast	1%	18%	26%	38%
	Pie	4%	18%	32%	34%
	Mexican	1%	12%	35%	39%
	Lasagne	2%	11%	35%	37%
	Curry	1%	15%	34%	36%
Chicken	Roast	2%	25%	30%	34%
	Casserole	5%	18%	30%	34%
	Curry	5%	16%	32%	33%
Fish	Fingers	7%	20%	27%	30%
Lamb	Roast	1%	13%	31%	42%
Other	Fried rice	7%	19%	28%	34%

* Based on meals most commonly selected in response to: "Thinking about the last six months, which of the following dinners have you prepared in the home?" and "How often do you typically prepare these dishes?"

Different dishes meet specific needs

While key drivers of meal choice are taste, convenience, cost, health and cooking ability, meals are often chosen for specific needs.

When planning meals, taste is the number one consideration for all life stages. The next consideration is convenience for young singles, all couples and families with older children. In contrast, for households with young children and older singles, it is cost. Childrens' activities and work commitments play a smaller role compared to cooking skill. While health is a driver of meal choice, taste, convenience, cost and cooking skills largely determine the meals in the repertoire.

Main meal preparers see different dishes meeting different needs. Sandwiches are the ultimate 'stop gap' meal. The BBQ is the 'easy entertaining' meal. Spaghetti bolognese is the versatile meal that everyone loves. Roasts are the 'two in one' meal, good for now and good for leftovers. The casserole is the easily reheated meal and the slow cooker meets all key drivers of meal choice.

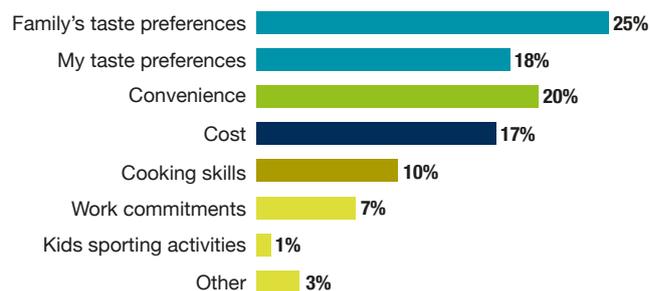
While most meals are prepared by all life stages, the following preferences were evident:

- Vegetarian choices, Asian noodles and 2-minute noodles for young singles and couples
- Rissoles, beef casserole, roasts, lasagne and beef sausages for households with children
- 2-minute noodles, burgers, Mexican beef and chicken nuggets for households with younger children
- Pork and lamb chops and vegetable soup for households with older adults



“A slow cooker is good for me because if the children have sport you can just serve it up whenever ... You just chuck everything in the morning and then when you come home you can smell it when you walk in. ”

Drivers of main meal choices



Reasons for the main meal choice

Top 15 meal choices	Taste				Convenience		Cost	Skills
	My favourite	Partner's favourite	Family favourite	Children's favourite	Quick and easy – pressed for time	Quick and easy – don't feel like cooking	Inexpensive meal	I can make well
1	Steak	Steak	Spaghetti bolognese	Spaghetti bolognese	Sandwich	Sandwich	Beef sausages	Beef casserole/stew
2	Chicken breast	Chicken breast	Chicken roast	Chicken nuggets	Beef sausages	2-minute noodles	Beef casserole/stew	Chicken curry
3	Spaghetti bolognese	Beef casserole/stew	Lamb roast	Beef sausages	Chicken breast	Beef sausages	Rissoles	Spaghetti bolognese
4	Vegetable soup	Spaghetti bolognese	Chicken breast	2-minute noodles	Scrambled eggs	Fried eggs	Spaghetti bolognese	Chicken breast
5	Chicken schnitzel	Fish (fillet or whole)	Lasagne	Chicken schnitzel	Fried eggs	Scrambled eggs	Fried eggs	Steak
6	Chicken stir fry	Lamb chops	Meat/seafood pizza	Chicken breast	Steak	Meat/seafood pizza	Scrambled eggs	Chicken roast
7	Chicken roast	Lamb roast	Beef casserole/stew	Beef burger	Spaghetti bolognese	Spaghetti bolognese	Vegetable soup	Chicken stir fry
8	Fried eggs	Chicken roast	Steak	Lasagne	Chicken stir fry	Wrap	Meatballs	Vegetable soup
9	Chicken curry	Chicken curry	Chicken schnitzel	Meat/seafood pizza	Omelette	Beef burger	Sandwich	Lamb roast
10	Fish (fillet or whole)	Chicken schnitzel	Beef roast	Meatballs	2-minute noodles	Omelette	Shepherd's pie	Chicken casserole/stew
11	Scrambled eggs	Chicken stir fry	Lamb chops	Fried eggs	Beef stir fry	Beef pie	Chicken casserole/stew	Beef roast
12	Lamb roast	Lasagne	Fried rice	Fish fingers	Beef burger	Chicken breast	Omelette	Lasagne
13	Beef casserole/stew	Meat/seafood pizza	Pork roast	Scrambled eggs	Beef casserole/stew	Fish crumbed/battered	Chicken curry	Scrambled eggs
14	Sandwich	Beef roast	Fish (fillet or whole)	Rissoles	Chicken schnitzel	Vegetable soup	2-minute noodles	Beef stir fry
15	Lamb chops	Beef stir fry	Chicken stir fry	Fried rice	Lamb chops	Vegetable salad	Fried rice	Beef curry

It comes down to cooking confidence and involvement

Most Australians believe they are able to quickly make a meal from scratch and even adapt and improvise to some extent.

Most main meal preparers report being quite or very confident cooks when it comes to preparing quick and/or inexpensive meals; using fresh seasonal produce; and adapting or improvising based on available ingredients and equipment.

However, many are less confident when it comes to planning a meal for a number of people with different ages and dietary requirements such as allergies.



Young singles are our least confident cooks overall. Young couples are the most capable at cooking quick, economical meals and improvising a main meal from different ingredients. Households with young children are more likely to know how to plan a meal to meet different dietary requirements. Older families and older couples are the most confident at making a tasty meal with fresh produce. Older singles are less confident at making inexpensive meals and meeting dietary requirements.

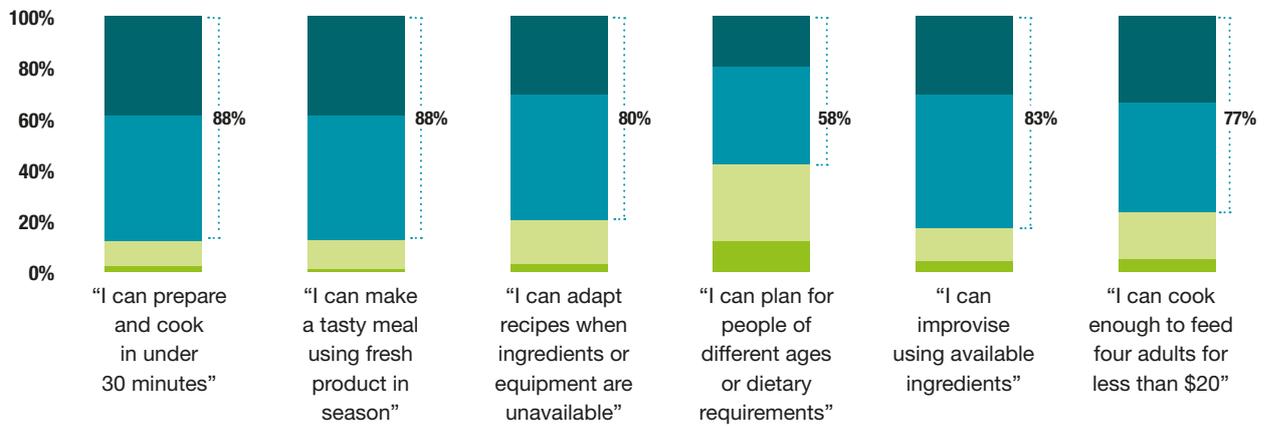
It is helpful to break food involvement down to three elements. The first element involves thinking and talking about food, the second involves activity in relation to food (shopping, preparation, clean up afterwards) and the final element involves enjoyment (eating and the eating environment). For most main meal preparers, engagement with food is mainly about preparation and cooking activities, rather than thinking, talking and enjoyment.

Younger couples are into food and enjoy cooking and talking. Parents with young children are more into talking about food and less into the enjoyment of food. Older couples are more into food and travel, whereas singles, young and old, are the least involved in food.

“Having two young children doesn’t make cooking fun. It’s not like when it was just us, we’d cook together and eat at the table.”

Cooking confidence and skill

● Not at all confident ● Not very confident ● Quite confident ● Very confident



Food involvement



1 Agree 2 Disagree

Life stage, skill and income determine the scope of the menu

The main influences on the number of meals in the repertoire are life stage, cooking skill and income.

The need for variety among main meal preparers with children has been noted as well as the influence of income on the number of meals in the repertoire. While planning style does not appear to influence the size of the main meal repertoire, cooking skill and food involvement does play a role.

Main meal preparers who view themselves as skilled cooks prepare more meals in their repertoire and there is also a correlation between the degree of food involvement and size of the repertoire.

Further insight into the relationship between food involvement and skill and repertoire can be gleaned from comparing two starkly different segments – ‘Foodies’ and the ‘Uninvolved’. Refer to adjacent table for definitions.

‘Foodies’ have the greatest number of meals in the repertoire and are also more likely to introduce new meals into the repertoire. ‘Foodies’ are just as likely to be male as female, are more likely to be under 40 years of age, with higher education and income status.

The ‘Uninvolved’ tend to plan meals daily, have the lowest number of meals in their repertoire and are the most likely never to introduce new meals into the repertoire. Main meal preparers in this group are more likely to be female, over 50 years of age, living alone and with lower education and income status.



Number of meals by cooking skill

	Average number of meals	
	Not confident	Confident
Prepare and cook a main meal in under 30 minutes	23	28
Make a tasty main meal using fresh produce in season	22	28
Adapt a recipe when required ingredients or equipment (eg food processor) is not available	22	29
Plan a main meal for a number of people with different ages, dietary requirements (allergies, vegetarian) for any occasion	24	30
Improvise a main meal by pulling together from available ingredients	23	28
Prepare and cook a main meal sufficient to feed four adults for less than twenty dollars	23	29

Influence of food involvement and skill on meal repertoire

	'Foodies'	'Uninvolved'
Food involvement	Like all aspects of cooking and preparing food and like to talk and think about food	Uninvolved with cooking and food in general
Food skills	High confidence and skill	Low confidence and skill
Type of respondents	No gender skew, more likely to be under 40 with higher education and income	Skewed towards females, likely to be over 50, single/divorced/ separated/widowed, with lower education and income
Number of meals in repertoire	33	20



"I don't like cooking. It's more something that you have to do. I just grew up like that, my mum didn't like cooking either. So it's a chore."



"I love to cook. My girlfriends like to come around too on Fridays for me to cook for them. I like cooking different sauces and different cuisines; especially Asian."

Cooking skill and takeaway frequency influences the healthiness of the meal

The healthiness of a meal is influenced by cooking skill and to a lesser extent, purchasing behaviour, with takeaway frequency, another important factor.

The reported number of vegetables typically consumed with meals provides an indication of the healthiness of the meal.

Consumption of takeaways reduces the number of vegetables served in meals with those having takeaway more frequently reporting less vegetables typically consumed with meals. While planning

style does not influence the number of vegetables served in a meal, those who plan meals for the week have takeaway less often. Similarly, those who are less confident in their cooking skills have takeaway more often.

‘Foodies’, those with the most cooking skills and interest in food, report the greatest number of vegetables served with meals as well as the greatest number of meals in the repertoire. A more flexible, generic approach to purchasing meal ingredients also shows the greatest number of vegetables included in meals in the repertoire.

Gender and different life stages also affect the number of vegetables served with main meals. Young singles and males report the lowest intake of vegetables, while families with children over 12 and women have the greatest number of vegetables served with main meals.

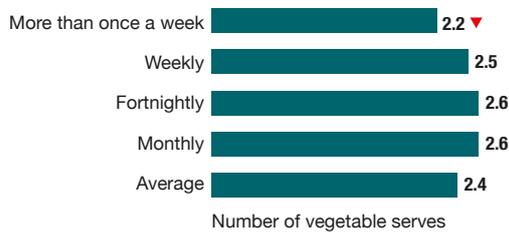
It is unclear whether these factors directly or indirectly influence the number of vegetables served in a meal. However, it seems that skills and food involvement – which provides the ability and flexibility to prepare a variety of meals and ultimately, reduce the need for takeaways – must ultimately increase the healthiness of a meal.



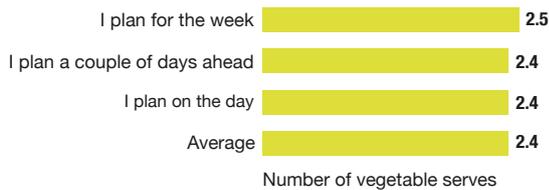
“Sometimes my children just eat cooked pasta with nothing on it – maybe just some tomato sauce – in the holidays.”

Vegetable serves typically consumed with main meals

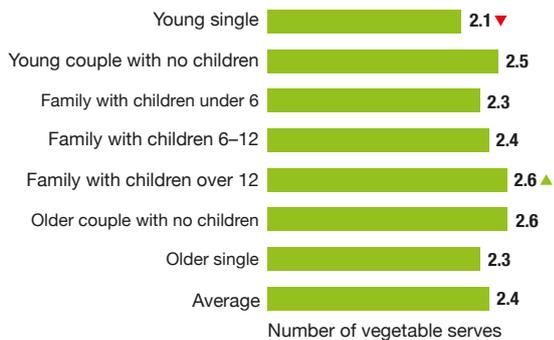
Takeaway frequency



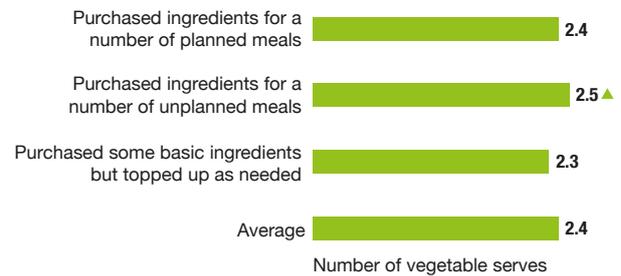
Meal planning



Life stages



Purchasing behaviour



Food involvement and skills



Gender



Significantly higher ▲ or lower ▼

Conclusion

Main meal preparers prefer a flexible and varied approach to meal planning and food preparation. There is no typical menu plan and weekly planning is rare. Instead, there is a broad range of meals in the repertoire where different meals are chosen to meet specific needs and circumstances.

Since cooking confidence and involvement influence both the variety and healthiness of the repertoire, it would be worthwhile understanding what type of skills main meal preparers require to better meet their needs.

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