



The fussy eater

Ariel Leve

You can do anything in a department store these days – including eat. But it doesn't mean that you should

There was a Woolworths a few blocks away from the New York apartment I grew up in and often, on a Saturday afternoon, my grandmother would take me there for lunch. You'd walk past the aisles of penny candy and stationery supplies until you could smell the coffee brewing. We would sit at the counter. The waitress taking our order would pull a pencil out from behind her ear and scribble it down on a pad. "What can I get you?" she'd ask. My order never varied. Grilled cheese and a chocolate milkshake. That was when I was lactose tolerant.

In the 1970s, no one was worried about food being fresh. Even me. I don't recall if there was an actual kitchen, but I doubt it. The pies that sat in the pie cases had enough lard to preserve them for decades. Lard was the Botox for pies.

The cooks would make the sandwiches on the spot and everything else went on the griddle or in the deep fryer. The counter was set up as a giant loop so that simultaneously we could watch them flip the burgers while people shopped for hairnets and socks.



When I got older, Woolworths had gone into decline and, instead, we'd go for meals at Saks Fifth Avenue or Bloomingdales. My grandmother loved eating in department stores. It was probably the convenience of being able to do two things she loved in one place. Shop and eat.

For me, eating in a restaurant next to the lingerie department felt claustrophobic. I don't enjoy eating somewhere where there aren't windows. Plus, I was never a devoted shopper and find it stressful. I get in, get what I need, and get out. How much shopping are you doing where you have to pause to refuel?

I know one stop for everything has become popular, though, and it's a concept that shows no signs of abating.

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In America, Wal-Mart has removed the chore of ever having to go outside. You can visit the doctor, have dinner, buy patio furniture and pretzels. At the Mall of America in Minnesota, you can get married, divorced and have your baby christened, proving that an entire lifetime can unfold under one roof.

Now that chemists have become like department stores, it was only a matter of time before they started to sell food. I don't want to purchase a sandwich in the same place people are getting haemorrhoid cream.

Which brings me to the packaged sandwich. At home, you make a sandwich and then you eat it. No one makes one and puts it away for a couple of days.

Even worse is packaged sushi. Chances are there isn't a sushi chef in the bowels of Boots slicing up fresh tuna. Which means it's been prepped in a factory somewhere in south Wales. This sushi has migrated further than an Atlantic salmon.

Convenience is undermining our culinary experience. People are now buying their produce at service stations. I know shopping for locally sourced food is desirable but are there really tomato vines at the garage?

Forty years ago, unless you were living on a hippie commune, no one cared if the food wasn't organic. But now, our palate is more educated. There is something incongruous about seeing pineapple on the shelf of a newsagent. Of course, my grandmother would have loved it. **OFM** ariel.leve@observer.co.uk

KITCHEN APPS

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Great British chefs – Feastive

What is it? The food app equivalent of Manchester City: a no-expense spared

bid for the top, based around securing the finest talent available. The impressive selection of chefs involved includes Marcus Wareing, Simon Rogan, Bruno Loubet and Nathan Outlaw. This is the Christmas spin-off. £1.99, for iPhone and iPad.

Key ingredient? Each chef contributes a full

Christmas menu, including canapés and petits fours. Very classy. They're good, too. **Yes, but can I manage it at home?** All the dishes are graded for difficulty but "medium" may count as pretty tricky for some. Unless you regularly knock out a dessert of caramel mille-feuille, mango and gold leaf press and crystallised chilli.

Will it improve my cooking? The videos of the more cheffy techniques, such as butchering rabbit, are great. Ace those and you can handle Monica Galetti and her infamous MasterChef Pro skills test, no problem.

THE PIE CHART

This month: the rising weight of the average American

