

Last Night's Dinner

What Australians prepared for dinner last night



About the research

'Last Night's Dinner' provides an in-depth understanding of Australians' main meal practices focusing on meals prepared in the home.

Over one week in May 2009, The Clever Stuff research and analytics agency asked 1,421 people about the dinner meal they had last night. This sample represents 1,007 meals prepared in the home and 414 meals eaten out of the home.

The person responsible for preparing last night's dinner meal (the meal preparer) was interviewed by telephone. If they were not available, the person who answered the phone (the non-meal preparer) was interviewed about the meal they had last night.

Interviews took place from Tuesday 5th to Monday 11th of May 2009. This period was chosen in an attempt to avoid seasonal bias in food habits related to the height of summer and the depths of winter.

People aged 18-65 were interviewed and quotas were set by State (including metro, regional and rural areas), age and day of week to ensure a representative sample of Australian meal preparers.

The findings are surprising and will likely challenge widespread misconceptions regarding dinner meal practices in Australia today. They provide detailed insights into Australians' dinner meal, building on previous research presented in the 2008 report, *The Real Food Trend*.¹

The research was commissioned by Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA). MLA is a producer-owned company and represents the beef, sheep meat and goat meat producers of Australia and manages research and development, marketing and communications on behalf of the red meat industry.

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1. *The Real Food Trend*,
Meat & Livestock Australia 2008.
(Also available from
<http://www.redmeatandnutrition.com.au/Nutrition+Research/>)



Overview of dinner

We are mostly cooking and eating dinner at home ... page 2

More than seven out of ten dinner meals are prepared and cooked at home.

Dinner at home is a healthy, balanced meal ... page 4

The nutritional balance of meals is important to those planning, preparing and cooking for their families. This is reflected in high consumption of fresh vegetables as well as the use of healthier cooking methods and ingredients.

We love fresh and familiar meals ... page 6

Australians show a preference for traditional, familiar meals which typically consist of red meat served with fresh vegetables.

Steak and veg is our most popular dish ... page 8

Australians especially love steak and veg which they explain is easy to cook, healthy, eaten with three to four different vegetables and a family favourite.

We don't plan ahead and we cook from scratch ... page 10

Meal preparers are not spending a lot of time planning meals, but they are taking the time to cook healthy and nutritious meals with fresh ingredients.

Cooking at home – enjoyable and rewarding ... page 12

More than seven out of ten Australians are claiming they are cooking more often, enjoying it more and feeling motivated to spend more time creating and experimenting with food.

We mostly eat together at the dinner table ... page 14

Contrary to prevailing opinion, we are mostly eating the same meal at home together around the dinner table, although sometimes with the television in the background.

What's for dinner tonight? ... page 16

For meal preparers, dinner-time may well be the best opportunity to ensure they and their families are eating well.

We are mostly cooking and eating dinner at home

A much smaller proportion of meals are prepared and eaten outside the home.

Overall nearly nine out of ten dinner meals are eaten at home, with more than seven out of ten dinner meals freshly prepared, cooked and eaten in the home. Typically, these home cooked meals are cooked from scratch with fresh ingredients. Interestingly, Australians seem to prefer familiar, traditional meals such as steak and vegetables, roast chicken and spaghetti bolognese. Less than two out of ten meals eaten at home include pre-cooked or pre-prepared meals, frozen meals bought from a food outlet and take-way or home delivered meals.

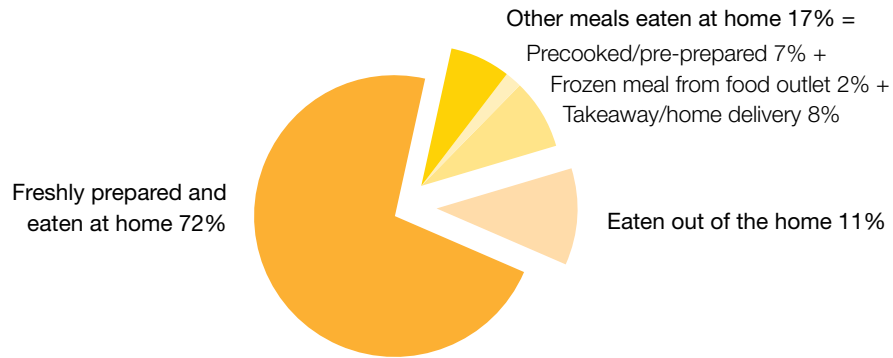
Only around one in ten dinner meals are prepared and eaten outside the home. These meals come from a combination of sources including take-aways, meals eaten at a family or friend's home and meals eaten in a restaurant, pub or club. The most popular take-away meals are pizzas, hamburgers, chicken or fried rice. Meals people enjoyed in restaurants were varied, but popular choices were Asian, chicken, fish and vegetables, pizza, pasta, roast lamb, casseroles and curries.

Slightly less than six meals are prepared in the home in any given week. Older Australians tend to cook at home more often, with older females being more likely to cook. Younger people, especially males, are the least enthusiastic about home-cooking. Many in this group like to go out for dinner, particularly on Friday nights and the weekend. Single people are also less likely to prepare meals at home.

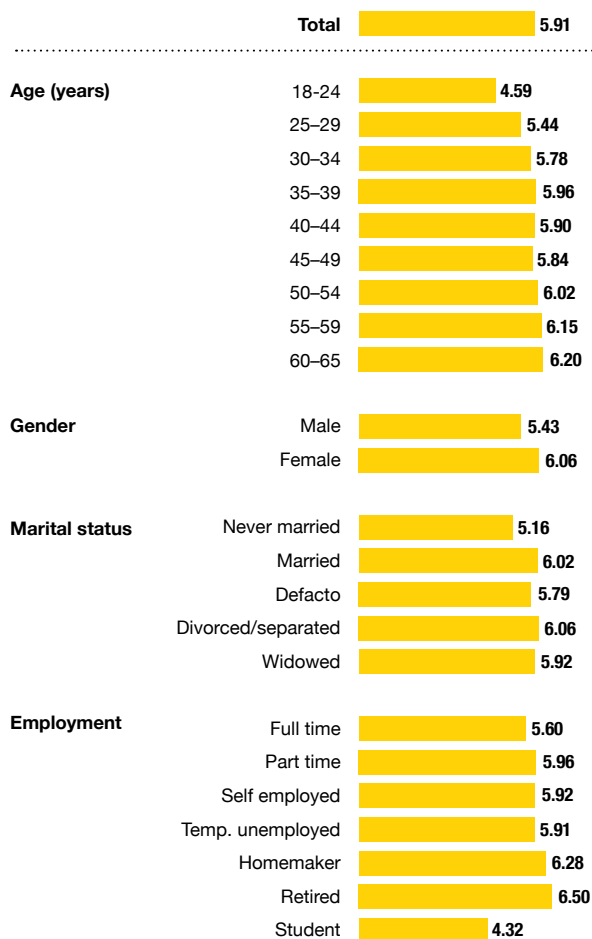
Most commonly Australians are cooking and eating dinner at home – nearly six nights a week.



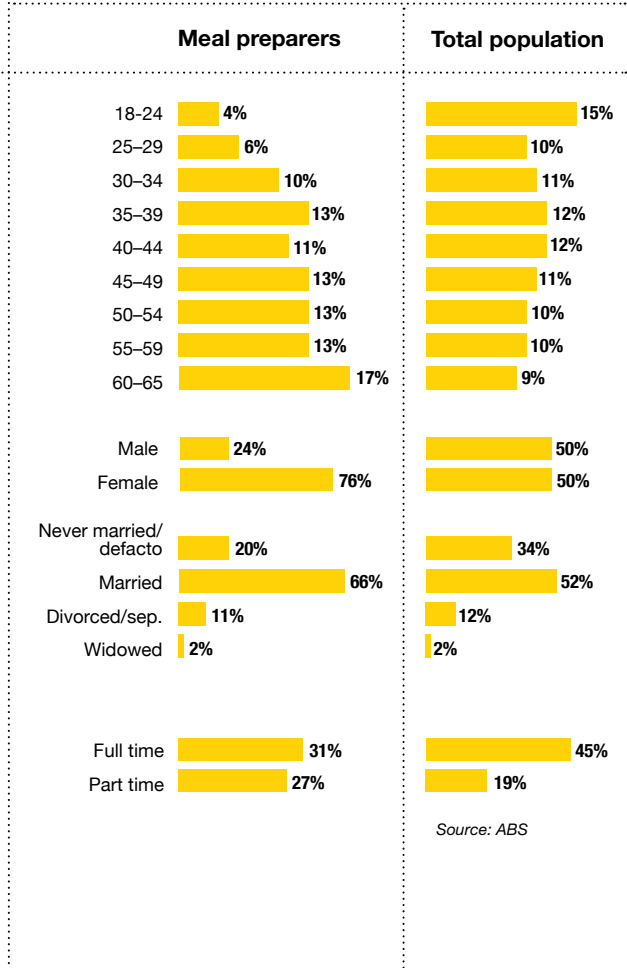
Last night's meal



Number of nights a week Australians prepare meals at home



Profile of Australians preparing meals at home



Dinner at home is a healthy, balanced meal

Across all age groups, the vast majority of Australian food preparers believe it is important to get the nutritional balance right in the meals they cook. More importantly they are acting on this belief.

Meal preparers are making greater efforts to include more and more fresh ingredients in the meals they serve their families. On average more than nine out of ten meal preparers are removing most of the fat from the meat they prepare and the vast majority buy meat and chicken without any fat or skin. This is less so for pork. Nearly half are using low fat dairy options at dinner.

Over sixty percent of meals included three or more vegetables (not including potato). While there are few surprises about which vegetables rate as the most popular – carrots, potatoes, onions, broccoli and peas – Australians are nevertheless consuming a very impressive array with over 28 different vegetables eaten including bok choy and eggplant. Nearly a fifth have salad with dinner meals and half of those salad-eaters have dressing.

Different meals invite different numbers of vegetables. Lamb chops, for example, are frequently served with close to four different vegetables, plus potato, nearing a total of five vegetables for dinner. Chicken stir fry incorporates nearly four different vegetables. On the other hand less than three vegetables are served with pan-fried chicken and chicken casserole.

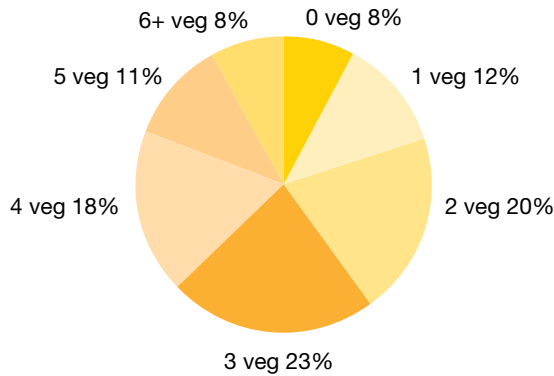
Most meal preparers add some oil but very few use butter or margarine. They are also endeavouring to enhance the taste of meals by using fresh herbs and spices. Water is by far the most popular drink served at dinner.



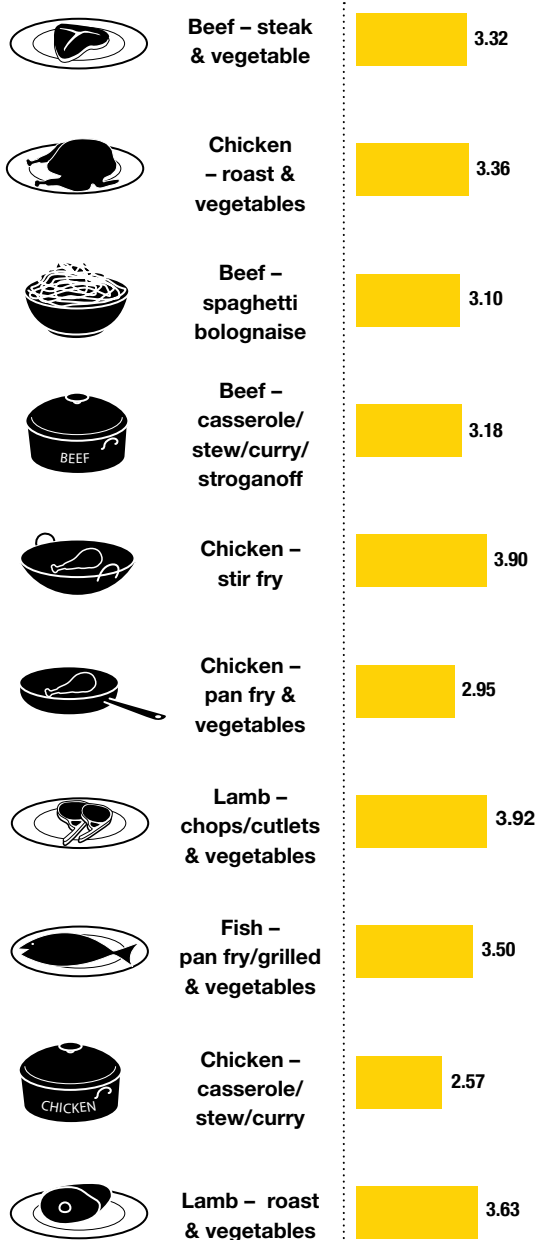
It seems the Australian dinner is largely prepared and eaten at home, it is healthy, balanced and made from fresh ingredients.

Number of vegetables served at dinner

(not including potato)



Number of vegetables served with top 10 dishes (not including potato)



Summary of food and nutrition at dinner

Food items	% of meals including	Details
Vegetables (not including potato)	92%	A wide variety of mostly fresh vegetables with carrots, onions, broccoli, green peas most popular
Meat, fish, poultry	90%	Primarily trimmed Beef and lamb (48%), Chicken (24%), Fish/Seafood (10%), mostly pan fried with some roasting
Eggs, nuts and legumes	25%	Eggs (13%), legumes/pulses (9%)
Carbohydrate foods	82%	Potatoes (41%); bread, rice, pasta (52%) – all served equally
Dairy foods	41%	46% use low fat dairy options
Added fats	76%	Mostly oil
Herbs, spices	85%	Mostly pepper and garlic
Added salt	56%	
Sauces	57%	Mostly tomato-based pasta sauce, stock, tomato/BBQ sauce and gravy
Dessert	27%	Mostly, icecream/sorbet or fruit
Beverages	92%	Water is the most popular beverage (45%)

We love fresh and familiar meals

Australians favour familiar traditional style dinners, typically consisting of red meat served with a variety of fresh vegetables.

Most Australians still preferred familiar, traditional food for dinner. Old favourites such as steak and vegetables, roast lamb or chicken, spaghetti bolognese and lamb chops are consistently nominated as favourite dishes. Typically, these popular meals are prepared on a very regular basis, either once a week or, the very least, once a month.

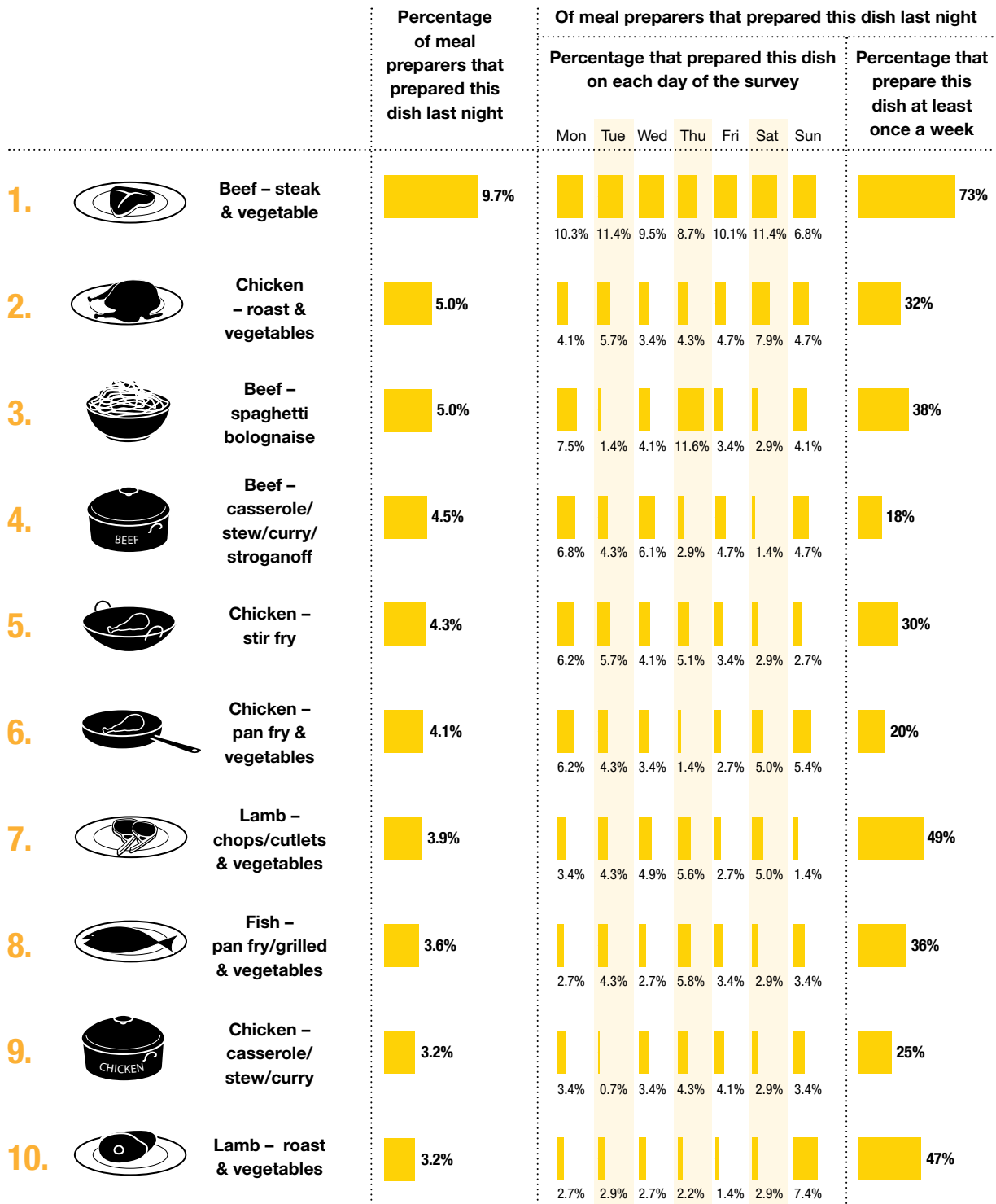
The ten most popular dishes are all familiar and recognisable, all reasonably straightforward to cook and all contain healthy ingredients. Half of the top ten popular dishes are beef or lamb dishes, four are chicken dishes and one fish meal makes the top ten.

The typical meal served and eaten on the Australian dinner table would be a red meat dish with at least three or four different varieties of fresh vegetables. Whether it is rump, porterhouse or fillet, fried, grilled or barbecued, steak and vegetables is by far our most popular dish. On average, Australian families sit down to steak and vegetables at least once a week, most commonly pan-fried, trimmed of its fat and served with three vegetables such as carrots, peas, pumpkin and corn, as well as potatoes.

Some dishes are much more likely than others to be cooked on certain days of the week, reflective in some ways of traditional eating patterns. For example, roast lamb is much more likely to be cooked on Sundays. Spaghetti bolognese and chicken stir fry are more likely to be prepared on weeknights. Steak and vegetables, while popular most nights of the week, are less likely to be eaten on Sundays.



The 10 most popular dinner dishes prepared at home



It seems that the dishes we cook have not changed greatly in the last twenty years. In fact, research shows that we continue to eat familiar traditional meals.

Steak and veg is our most popular dish

Australians prefer to prepare meals that are easy and convenient, where we have all the ingredients already at home.

Unsurprisingly, meal preparers choose to cook meals for which they have the ingredients handy or meals that are favourite, familiar and convenient. Interestingly, meal preparers did not rate 'expense' as a key consideration when planning mealtimes.

Steak and vegetables is so popular because it requires little planning, and is fast and simple to prepare and is a personal favourite. Not only can we cook steak in various ways, but we can vary, mix and combine it with cooked vegetables of all sorts or salad. A flexible meal indeed!

Home-cooked steak and vegetables are more likely to be prepared without any ready-made ingredients, so fulfils the strongly prevailing desire to use only fresh foods in our cooking.

Furthermore, beef steak and vegetables is popular with all age groups and with both males and females. A higher proportion of men, students, the unemployed and people eating alone like to cook steak compared with other popular dishes.

Grilled fish and vegetables is the meal most likely to be selected for health reasons. Dishes such as chicken stir fry, chicken casseroles and steak and vegetables are also popular with those meal preparers who rate nutritional balance very highly.











For those with children, spaghetti bolognese is the most popular dinner meal. It is also one of the few popular dinners where being inexpensive is a consideration, albeit ease and convenience is still of greater importance.

Older meal preparers favour lamb chops or cutlets and grilled or pan-fried fish, both with vegetables. Both these dinners are often made for two people.

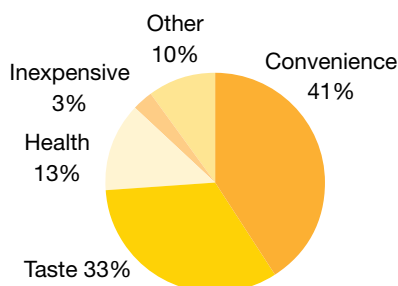
Roast lamb and roast chicken are frequently prepared as family favourites.



Reasons for choosing top 10 dishes

	Convenience	Taste	Healthy	Inexpensive	Other
 Beef – steak & vegetable	50%	30%	11%	3%	6%
 Chicken – roast & vegetables	40%	44%	10%	0%	6%
 Beef – spaghetti bolognese	50%	24%	6%	8%	12%
 Beef – casserole/ stew/curry/ stroganoff	51%	33%	2%	0%	13%
 Chicken – stir fry	40%	21%	16%	7%	16%
 Chicken – pan fry & vegetables	41%	46%	5%	2%	5%
 Lamb – chops/cutlets & vegetables	31%	46%	8%	8%	8%
 Fish – pan fry/grilled & vegetables	31%	28%	36%	0%	6%
 Chicken – casserole/ stew/curry	25%	50%	13%	3%	9%
 Lamb – roast & vegetables	19%	63%	9%	0%	9%

Drivers of meal choice



Convenience 41% =
Easy/convenient 23% + Had everything at home 12% + In a hurry 6%

Taste 33% =
Family favourite 13% + My favourite 10% + Kids favourite 4% + It was a treat 4% + Partners favourite 2%

Health 13% =
Low fat 9% + Nutritional balance 4%

We don't plan ahead and we cook from scratch

While many Australians find it challenging to make the time to plan meals in advance, most meal preparers are enthusiastically focusing their attention on meal preparation. Most use healthy, fresh ingredients in their home-cooked meals, which more often than not, are cooked from scratch.

The majority of Australian meal preparers claim they enjoy cooking and particularly like cooking meals for special occasions. While some of us are unenthusiastic about daily cooking, most meal preparers have perfected their repertoire of recipes and are using them with flair and confidence.

Contrary to the popularly held belief that people find cooking a chore, most meal preparers are taking pleasure in it. Even every day cooking evokes little protest. In fact, the majority of meal preparers (63%) prefer to start a meal from scratch with only a small proportion (9%) preparing a meal from mainly ready-made ingredients.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there is a strong relationship between scratch cooking and age; the older you are the more likely you are to cook from scratch and the younger you are the more likely you are to use pre-prepared and ready-made ingredients. Dinner meals less likely to be made from scratch are chicken meals – pan-fried with vegetables, stir fry, casserole, stew or curry – and spaghetti bolognese. For those meals where ready-made sauces are added during meal preparation, the most popular additions are tomato-based pasta sauce (30%) and stock (23%).

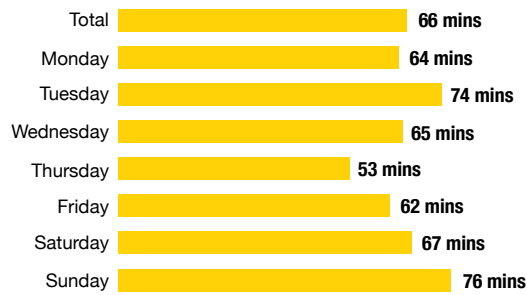
On average, meal preparers spend just over an hour preparing and cooking the main meal. Certainly not a rush job! Nevertheless, easy, familiar and convenient meals are favoured, especially on weekdays. On weekends, when people are generally more relaxed and less hurried, more time is spent considering and preparing what they will have for dinner. Meal preparers are more likely to prepare meals from scratch on Saturdays, Sundays and Tuesdays and least likely on Thursdays.

Most meal preparers only start to plan what they will have for dinner on any given night in the middle of the same day. Only Monday and Sunday main meals receive more time and attention, with Sunday dinner traditionally being an occasion for the family to gather together for a special meal like a roast.

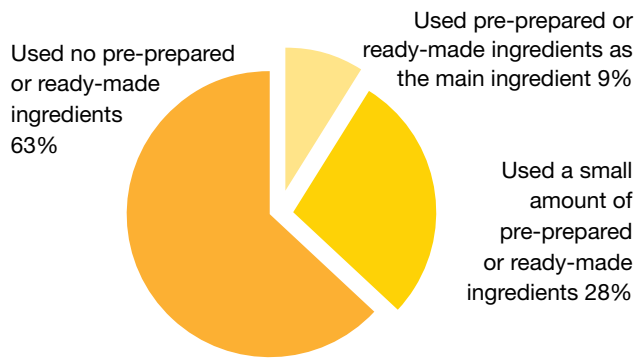
Overall, time constraints do not appear to compromise the quality of the family meal. Despite these pressures, the majority of meal preparers are conscientious about using fresh, healthy ingredients in many different and varied ways.

Even though not much time goes into planning meals, people are investing time in cooking from scratch with fresh ingredients.

Time taken to prepare and cook dinner each day



Cooking dinner from scratch at home



Preparation and planning times for top 10 dishes

	Preparation time	Planning time (percentage of meal preparers)			
		Several days before cooking	The day before cooking	Before noon on the day of cooking	After noon on the day of cooking
Beef – steak & vegetable	44 mins	12%	15%	20%	52%
Chicken – roast & vegetables	76 mins	14%	38%	12%	36%
Beef – spaghetti bolognese	52 mins	26%	20%	14%	38%
Beef – casserole/ stew/curry/ stroganoff	130 mins	20%	22%	27%	31%
Chicken – stir fry	39 mins	14%	16%	26%	42%
Chicken – pan fry & vegetables	48 mins	12%	24%	27%	34%
Lamb – chops/cutlets & vegetables	49 mins	18%	18%	15%	49%
Fish – pan fry/grilled & vegetables	40 mins	22%	17%	25%	33%
Chicken – casserole/ stew/curry	71 mins	19%	28%	22%	31%
Lamb – roast & vegetables	127 mins	28%	38%	19%	16%

Cooking at home – enjoyable and rewarding

Many Australians are claiming to be cooking more often, enjoying it more and feeling motivated to spend more time being creative and experimental with food. Often, a mealtime is a social occasion with partners and children pitching in to help.

The vast majority of Australian meal preparers not only feel confident about their cooking skills, but also find cooking a meal an enjoyable and satisfying experience that benefits the whole family. Many are also passionately interested in food.

Fuelled by a plethora of television cooking shows, media focus on diet, food and weight, Australians appear to be increasingly interested in what they eat and cook. More than seven out of ten report that they 'love to cook', with only a small proportion struggling to find time to do so. But even this 'struggling' group professes to love the idea of cooking. Only 18% admit to finding cooking a chore.



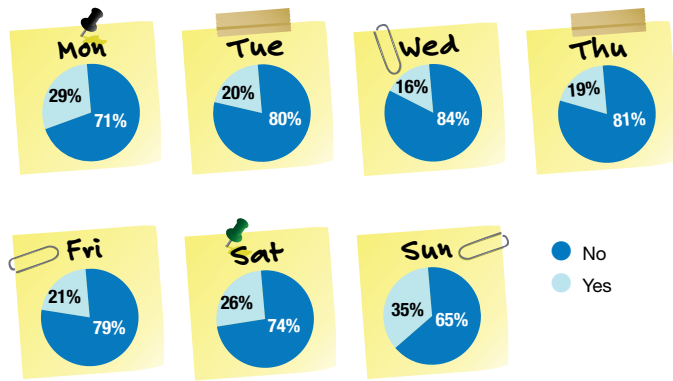
Meal preparers are taking the time to provide interesting and healthy meals and ensuring the family sits down together to enjoy them. Importantly, their efforts seem to be appreciated and help was being offered – about 24% of meal preparers had help preparing the main meal. Help with preparing a meal is more likely to be offered on the weekend and on a Monday and less likely during the middle of the week.

While it is true that women are currently doing most of the cooking at home, men appear to be demonstrating a willingness to be more involved in the practicalities of meal planning, preparation and cooking. Males, however, are more likely to receive help preparing the meal and prepare fewer vegetables on average (3.0 vegetables per meal) than women (3.4 vegetables).

Complaints about lack of time to cook also appear to have little substance. In fact, most Australians perceive the cooking of the evening meal as enjoyable, beneficial to family health and well-being, so worth the time and effort.

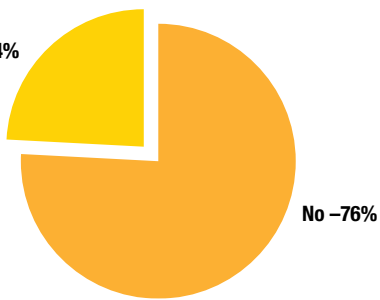
We're confident cooks when it comes to familiar meals. We like cooking and are passionately interested in food.

Received help preparing meal



Total

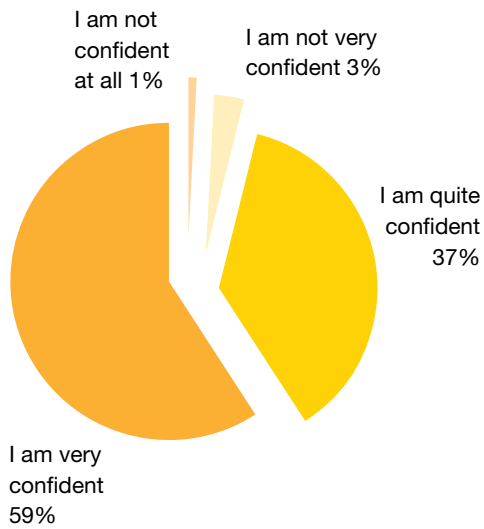
Yes – 24%



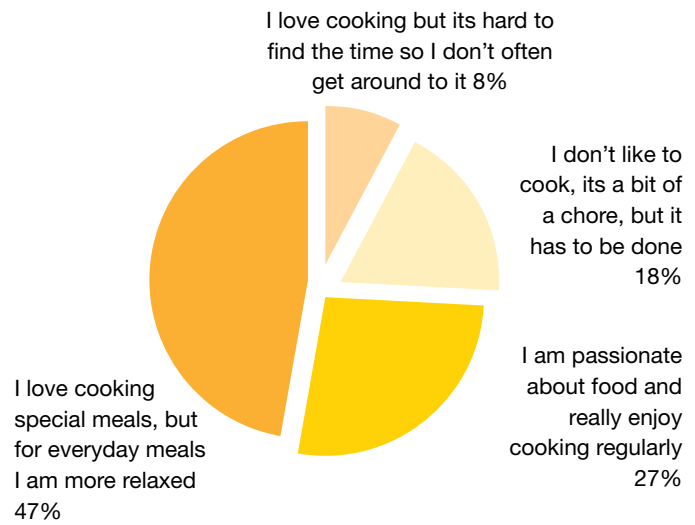
● No
● Yes



Cooking confidence



Cooking passion



We mostly eat together at the dinner table

Australians are mostly eating meals at home together around the dinner table, although some have the TV on in the background.

Closeness and communication, especially around a nourishing meal, is important to Australians. More and more, we are gathering around the family dinner table to share not only a meal but the news and events of the day.

The vast majority of us – 84% – are eating meals together. Friday is the day of the week we are less likely to eat together.

Australians are mostly eating the same meal as each other with only seven percent of meal preparers preparing additional meals. These extra meals are mainly to accommodate different tastes in the family or to cater for children and babies. Half of these extra meals contain no meat, fish or poultry.

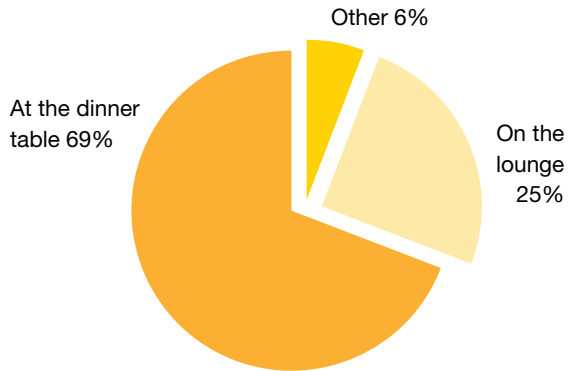
The dinner table is still the most popular location for mealtimes, with 69% reporting eating the majority of meals there. Married people, retirees, families with children under 18 and homemakers are more likely to eat at the dinner table. Meals most likely to be eaten at the table are red meat meals. Only a quarter of meals are eaten sitting on the lounge and these are more likely to be chicken and fish meals.

The majority of dinner meals are eaten while the TV is on, although it is not always being actively watched. If there are children in the household it is less likely that the TV is on. Unsurprisingly, the television is almost always watched if dinner is eaten on the lounge.

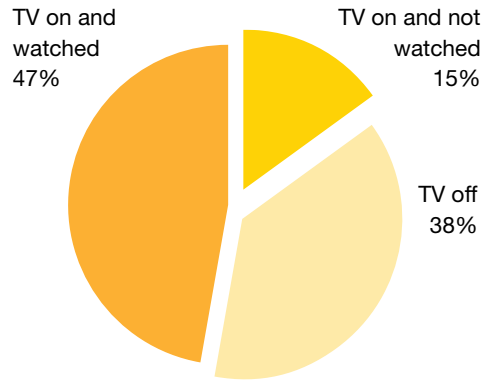


We mostly prefer to eat together around the table.

Where dinner was eaten



Whether the TV was on

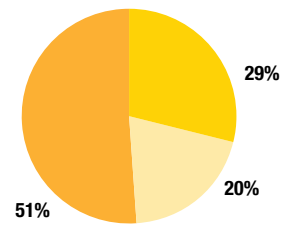


Where dinner was eaten by top 10 dishes

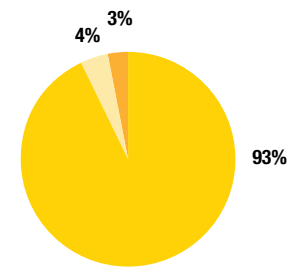
Dish	At the dinner table	On the lounge	Other
Beef – steak & vegetable	72%	24%	3%
Chicken – roast & vegetables	66%	30%	4%
Beef – spaghetti bolognaise	74%	24%	2%
Beef – casserole/stew/curry/stroganoff	73%	16%	11%
Chicken – stir fry	63%	33%	5%
Chicken – pan fry & vegetables	63%	32%	5%
Lamb – chops/cutlets & vegetables	72%	21%	8%
Fish – pan fry/grilled & vegetables	64%	25%	11%
Chicken – casserole/stew/curry	69%	31%	0%
Lamb – roast & vegetables	84%	13%	3%

TV watching according to where dinner was eaten

At the dinner table



On the lounge



- TV off
- TV was on but not watched
- TV was on and watched

What's for dinner tonight?

A healthy, fresh and home-prepared meal

This research has illustrated that, despite popular belief, Australians are preparing and enjoying healthy, fresh and home-prepared dinners. The most popular dinners are familiar and traditional meals such as steak and vegetables, roast chicken and spaghetti bolognese cooked from scratch. When meat is served it is generally trimmed of fat and accompanied by a variety of vegetables.

While daily cooking is often represented as a chore, it seems Australians are confident cooks prepared to dedicate the time to making meals from scratch, albeit meals within a set repertoire. Australians don't tend to plan ahead when it comes to cooking and weekends often provide the sole opportunity for taking time to cook special meals. Considering the cost and time involved in cooking, realistic and easy-to-digest information and guidance is needed to help meal preparers expand their current repertoire of meals.

It seems that price is not the driving factor when it comes to meal choice. A dish like steak and vegetables is popular, not because it is inexpensive, but because it requires little planning, is fast and simple to prepare, flexible and fulfils the desire among Australians to use fresh foods. Convenience and taste, nutritional value and acceptability to the whole family are what determine most choices when it comes to meal preparation, illustrating that 'value' involves much more than price in the minds of Australian consumers.

For meal preparers, dinner-time may well be the best opportunity to ensure they and their families are eating well, considering lunch and daily snacks are often eaten out of home. Dinners are also the best opportunity to ensure the family spend some time together, something Australians are acting on; most of us are gathering around the dinner table for the evening meal.

Importantly, this research indicates that Australians' interest in fresh, healthy, home-prepared meals remains strong as identified in the 2008 report, *The Real Food Trend*¹: mostly eating home-prepared dinner meals together; enjoying cooking and preferring to cook from scratch with fresh ingredients, and most commonly preparing a dinner meal of meat served with plenty of vegetables.

For meal preparers, dinner-time may well be the best opportunity to ensure they and their families are eating well.

1. *The Real Food Trend*, Meat & Livestock Australia 2008. (Also available from <http://www.redmeatandnutrition.com.au/Nutrition+Research/>)



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