

# The Washington Post

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## The state of the sit-down breakfast in Washington

By [Tim Carman](#), Published: April 10

About six years ago, [Michel Richard Citronelle](#) stopped offering a full-service, sit-down breakfast, a decision that would barely rate a mention if it weren't for the restaurant's location tucked inside the boutique Latham Hotel in Georgetown. A hotel without a space for breakfast is a hotel that has in part surrendered its captive audience — its guests — to the jungle of coffee-fueled opportunists outside just waiting to take those tourist dollars.

“Little by little, [breakfast] started slowing down, and we decided this was not worth the effort,” says Jean-Jacques Retourne, general manager and maitre d' at Citronelle, whose kitchen continued to offer room-service breakfasts even after its call to close the physical space for the morning.

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Last year, however, Citronelle gingerly re-entered the breakfast business with M Express, a mostly grab-and-go service of pastries, juice, coffee, omelets, bagels and cold cereal in the restaurant's lounge, a menu that rather smacks of a celebrity chef-branded continental breakfast. The new service, Retourne says, is just a reflection of the modern breakfast reality: Our hand-held, 24/7 information nation does not have time for it anymore.

“We're almost too plugged in. . . . They don't want to miss anything,” says Retourne. “There's less personal time. It's sad in a way. We're always running, running, running.”

Look around the Washington area, and you see that breakfast is mostly a functional, calorie-and-caffeine intake period. It's a stop at the chain coffee shop for a latte and (maybe) a pre-made sandwich. It's a turn into the McDonald's drive-through for juice and a McMuffin, a meal that can be unwrapped and consumed right in the car while listening to NPR, checking your e-mail at the stop light and worrying about the day ahead. Increasingly, what breakfast is not is a morning ritual of coffee, bacon, eggs, reflection and the daily paper (as if anyone buys those anymore, which is another story).

So what has happened to the so-called “most important meal of the day”?

Perhaps, as Marion Nestle suggests, we're finally listening to our bodies and not American marketing gurus. The nutritionist, author and New York University professor thinks the breakfast-is-important



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message was drummed up by cereal companies hoping to manufacture a need for their products. The truth is, breakfast is more important to children than adults simply because the former do not have the same capacity to store glycogen, which Nestle describes as “what keeps you going when you’re not eating.”

Nestle knows from experience that breakfast is eminently skippable. She rarely eats it — and makes no apologies about it. “I truly believe that people should eat when you’re hungry, and if you’re not hungry in the morning, the world is not going to end,” she says.

A general lack of interest in food in the morning may explain why relatively few restaurants cater to those early weekday risers. (For the better breakfast spots in and around Washington, see our list and [gallery](#).) But there are other factors as well. Coffee chains like Starbucks have aggressively targeted the breakfast crowd by doubling down on their morning options, offering not only hot drinks but also hot sandwiches, parfaits, pastries and other to-go items. But restaurateurs also say that breakfast service places an added burden on already-busy kitchens and rarely returns the profit that rewards such efforts. Just as important, they add, morning shifts are notoriously hard to staff.

“Most chefs and restaurateurs are creatures of the night,” says Jeff Tunks, chef and co-founder of Passion Food Hospitality, which owns [DC Coast](#), [Acadiana](#), [PassionFish](#) and other area eateries. “I don’t think a lot of chefs get up early and get breakfast. It’s not a natural reaction for most of us.”

### **Calories to burn**

The ever-shrinking breakfast hour is, by no means, exclusive to the Washington area, but some of the region’s characteristics may exacerbate the decline, which even includes the classic D.C. power breakfast, which hotel executives say has dropped off as well. The area’s workforce suffers some of the worst traffic in the nation, leaving little time for long, unhurried meals in the a.m. That same workforce also includes hundreds of thousands of federal, white-collar employees who don’t require the vast consumption of morning calories that used to fuel the heavy-labor jobs of previous generations. In fact, Joe Spinelli, president and founder of the Maryland-based [Restaurant Consultants](#), suggests that you can find more breakfast spots in cities with more blue-collar workers, like Baltimore.

“I can’t state this for sure, but there are probably twice as many breakfast places there as in D.C.,” says Spinelli.

He has had a unique perspective on the evolving breakfast scene. Spinelli was a consultant for Starbucks when the chain decided to launch a hot breakfast service in the mid-2000s under the somewhat ominous name, the Warming Program. Washington was deemed an ideal Warming zone, and Starbucks hired Spinelli to secure permits and help retrofit dozens and dozens of locations with coolers and TurboChef ventless ovens.

“They found that they had a captive market,” Spinelli says. “They had all these people in the stores early in the morning.” The stores that offer the pre-fab, reheated breakfast sandwiches add hundreds of dollars a day in sales, the consultant notes.

The concept of an on-the-run breakfast, however, dates back far earlier than Starbucks’s morning power grab. You could say it began in the 1970s when a California McDonald’s franchisee named Herb Peterson created the Egg McMuffin, which he based on his favorite breakfast dish, eggs Benedict. According to Anne A. Kohlenberger, breakfast category manager for McDonald’s USA, the Egg

McMuffin debuted on Jan. 31, 1972, at Peterson's McDonald's outlet in Santa Barbara.

A year later, Kohlenberger notes, "the McDonald's restaurant system started serving Egg McMuffins, and the iconic sandwich became a staple on the McDonald's breakfast menu. The sandwich was groundbreaking in changing the eating habits of millions of Americans, as prior to the Egg McMuffin, no other quick-service restaurant served breakfast."

Four decades later, the McDonald's and Starbucks approach to breakfast is starting to dominate the way hotel and restaurant operators think about the morning meal, at least on weekdays when time is precious. Kimpton Hotels, for example, is planning to test a grab-and-go breakfast service at one of its New York properties, says Greg Francis, senior director of restaurant operations for the East Coast.

"We'll use our experience from that and spread it out across the country where it's needed," Francis says. "We're competing with the Starbucks of the world, so we sort of have to meet that demand."

### **Breakfast by location**

Despite the rise of grab-and-go morning meals, a few local restaurateurs are starting to venture into the breakfast market, hoping to capture either those eaters who still want a sit-down meal or those who want something fresher than a reheated sandwich. Michael Babin, co-owner of the Neighborhood Restaurant Group, has designs to open an eatery near Dupont Circle, an area that has shown a taste for breakfast. Likewise, when NRG [opens its Red Apron Butchery shop in Penn Quarter](#) this fall, chef-butcher Nathan Anda plans to roll out a breakfast menu that will offer both sit-down and takeaway options.

"There is a market for breakfast. There really always has been," says Babin, whose other restaurants, from [Birch & Barley](#) to [Evening Star Cafe](#), typically do not open until lunch. "It's probably something that's location dependent," based on the density of office buildings.

Like Babin, Passion Food's Tunks has shied away from breakfast service — until he opened [Burger Tap & Shake](#) on Washington Circle, where the confluence of business offices, George Washington University classrooms and residential units provided plenty of reasons to open for the first meal of the day. But to make the morning service manageable, and possibly profitable, Tunks devised a clever, chef-driven menu that doesn't require a lot of extra labor: His line of "breakfast burgers" uses the same buns as his regular patties, while his "breakfast fries" merely require the prep team to add more cut spuds to its usual routine. He can run his whole breakfast program with three employees.

BTS's [breakfast burgers menu was launched in February](#), and its sales so far are fairly modest, ranging between 40 to 60 customers on most weekdays before swelling to 70 or more on Fridays. You could argue that those numbers underscore what Nestle suggested in the first place: Many may not feel hungry enough to fuel up first thing in the morning.

The science of human biology might drive some people's breakfast decisions, but not those of Ann Cashion, the James Beard award-winning chef behind [Johnny's Half Shell](#), which caters to Capitol Hill power brokers most weekday mornings. When not working, Cashion loves meeting one of her close friends for breakfast, which carries little of the forced, low-light intimacy of dinner and the free flow of alcohol that can generate those feelings. She fondly recalls the breakfasts she's enjoyed in New Orleans and San Francisco, cities not built on politics, power and cynicism.

Breakfast "just doesn't seem to be part of the culture here," Cashion says. "Maybe breakfast is driven by feeling connected. . . . I feel like New Orleans is a place where people feel connected, and San Francisco

is the same way.”

Is Cashion suggesting that breakfast is too intimate for Washington, a town increasingly comfortable with fractiousness and extremes? She laughs and brings the question back to the personal level, where she draws a subtle comparison between the meal that Washington loves (dinner) and the one it apparently doesn't (breakfast).

“I saw my friend over breakfast because it did seem more intimate in the sense of really catching up and really being present,” she says. “Maybe it's kind of like the difference between morning light and candlelight.” True friends, in other words, don't need a flickering ambiance to feel close. They can be intimate even over breakfast, a feast that appears to be turning into the most neglected meal of the day.

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