



Al desko dining

More and more busy workers are choosing to dine at their desk instead of going out. But is it such a good idea? By **Tim Elliott**.

ACCORDING to *The New York Times*, an office equipment company in Dallas, Texas has taken to substituting the formal lunch break with food capsules supplied by the company.

The food capsules, which consist of dried food concentrates and dietary supplements, can be washed down with a glass of water, allowing staff to continue working at their desks uninterrupted by anything as time-consuming as chewing.

Actually, I made that up, given away by the phrase "supplied by the company" (most employers would make staff bring their own food capsules). But in this 24-hour multitasking world, the food pill can't be far away. Australians, it seems, have already dispensed with the full-blown lunch hour, a curiously old-fashioned concept that seems to have gone the way of the telex and the tea lady.

A Herald/Nielsen survey last year showed only 16 per cent of Australians take between 45 minutes and an hour for lunch, while one in three take just 20 to 30 minutes. One in five Australians regularly dines al desko, eating lunch while at their desk. Of those people, most shovel food in while engaged in tasks such as reading, writing, answering the phone or all of the above.

"Eating at your desk is probably a lot more prevalent in office-based jobs where up to 75 per cent of workers are estimated to eat lunch at their desks at least twice a week," says Samantha Thomas, a sociologist at Monash University. "It's due to the increased time pressure on people, the difficulty of juggling work and family life, the pressure to achieve more at work in less time."

While it might not feel like it, dining al desko is risky business, with a University of Arizona study finding that desktops commonly have 400 times more bacteria than the average office toilet. It can also be boring: computers are good for web searches but they are notoriously bad conversationalists.

So why do people do it? "Because it's cheap and convenient," says Sydney lawyer Jane Sandilands. "I eat al desko because I am an overworked mother of one. I am obliged, in the interests of time saving, to eat whatever I feed my child: what I eat

mirrors exactly the contents of my child's daycare lunchbox. Cheese or Vegemite sandwiches, mainly."

Just as Vegemite triangles say something about Sandilands, every al desko meal tells a story. Ham and cheese rolls are very Clark Kent, an admirably no-fuss option for those who wish to make it plain that they are people of substance. Meat pies and Big Macs, on the other hand, display a lamentable disregard for the lower colon.

Takeaway sushi is just showing off. You should only eat fried rice from a cardboard box (the ones with those trendy little metal carry handles) if you're absolutely sure you are in New York or on the set of a sitcom.

And unless you wish to become one of the 17 million people who the World Health Organisation estimates die every year from cardiovascular disease, try to follow your lunch with some form of movement.

"And above all, enjoy your food," says Dr John Lang from Good Health Solutions, a Sydney corporate health and wellness service. "This isn't just a sensory thing, it's a health issue."

Lang cites a famous experiment by neuroscientist Vernon B. Mountcastle, where two groups of people ate lunch – one in a leisurely fashion, while the other had the food injected into their stomachs.

"The people who had the food injected into their stomachs went straight out and had lunch again," Lang says. "They hadn't gone through the cephalic phase, the thinking phase just before you eat, when your digestive juices start flowing in preparation to eat."

Lang's advice? "Take the time out to savour the food, to appreciate the aromas. That's not only because you will enjoy it more but your feeling of fullness will be greater for the amount of food consumed."

So next time you unwrap that tuna sandwich, pause and appreciate the nature of the repast before you. Put on some mood lighting. Your colleagues might not appreciate it but your waistline will.

What's your favourite al desko meal and where do you get it? Tell us all about it at smh.com.au/gl



Keyboard cuisine ... a typical al desko setting.

Photo: Ross Duncan

AL DESKO ETIQUETTE

- Chew quietly: other al deskos are trying to eat.
- If you use the microwave, clean it: people want to eat their own lunch, not various pieces of everyone else's.
- Do some postprandial housekeeping: spinach between your teeth is not a career-enhancing accessory. And you look like a clown with tomato sauce on your nose.
- That doesn't mean you should wear a bib: wearing any kind of protective gear while eating is a sign you don't know how to feed yourself and should be in a highchair.
- Stop eating when someone approaches your desk. This is not just courtesy but common sense: if a chunk of something drops from your mouth and onto the floor you're obliged to pick it up.
- Never make eye contact with other office diners: the best way to maintain your dignity while eating at your desk is to pretend you're not doing it.