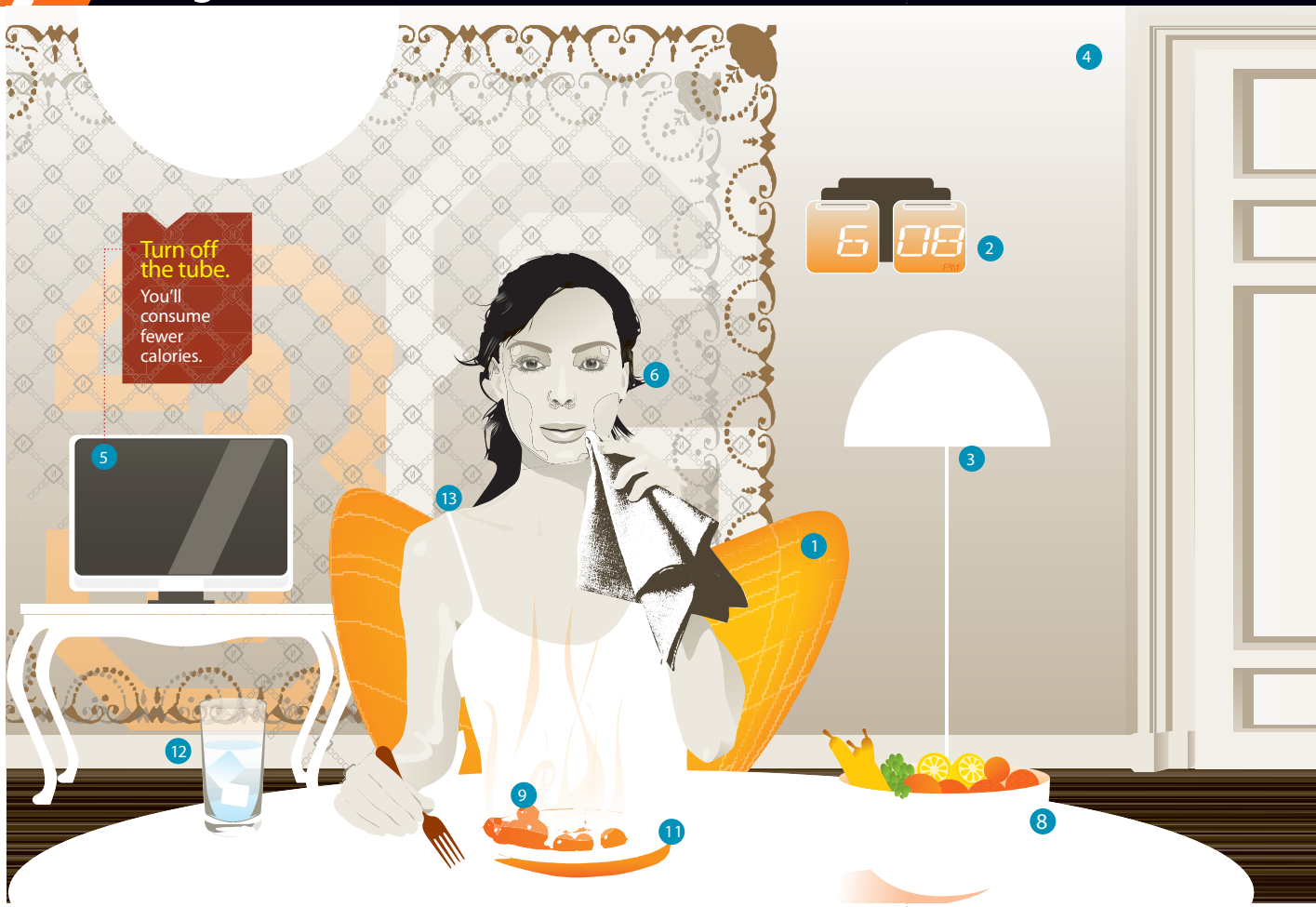


the ultimate diet dining room

Trying to eat (and weigh) less? Maybe it's time for a little redecorating

By Virginia Sole-Smith Illustration by 500GLS

If a herd of dust bunnies has colonized your dining room table because you eat most meals sprawled on your living room sofa, bent over your kitchen sink, behind the wheel of your car, or packed into a noisy restaurant, don't be surprised if you've got some extra junk in your trunk. "I analyze the dining environments of every one of my patients," says Dawn Jackson Blatner, R.D., a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association in Chicago. "So many people try to rely on willpower alone and don't understand why their diets fail. You can't lose weight if you're in an environment that doesn't support healthy eating." Based on the newest research and the best expert advice, we've put together a 13-step plan to help you create one that does. So get ready to start losing: It's time to banish those bunnies for good!

1. Pull up a chair

(and not in front of your PowerBook). Rule number one is simpler than Nicole Richie's job: "A meal is not a meal unless you have a table, a chair, and a plate," Blatner says. "If you eat on the go or standing in the kitchen, you rush through before your brain realizes you're full." Which means you shovel in more calories than you need.

2. Watch the clock.

If your body were a grade school, your stomach would be in the slow learners' class: It needs about 20 minutes to figure out it's full. No wonder research shows that taking less than 9 minutes to eat your meal can cause you to scarf an additional 70 calories or more, Blatner says. "That could add up to 20 extra pounds per year!" But in an evil twist of nature, lounging at the table for more than 30 minutes can make you eat just as much. The longer you linger, the likelier you are to reach for seconds. The ideal amount of time to spend at the table? 29 minutes.

3. Dim the lights.

"Bright lights encourage you to eat faster than you otherwise would because they make you feel stressed," says Brian Wansink, Ph.D., director of Cornell University's Food and Brand Lab and author of Mindless Eating. (Makes sense that most fast-food joints are as well lit as Paula Abdul.) But don't turn them off altogether:



"A MEAL IS NOT A MEAL UNLESS YOU HAVE A TABLE, A CHAIR, AND A PLATE."

"A dark room will lower your inhibitions, which means you'll be more likely to have dessert," Wansink says. Try using medium-wattage incandescent bulbs (60 to 75 watts), so you can see well enough to eyeball your escarole but don't feel like you're in an interrogation room at Baghdad International Airport.

4. Repaint. Bright, warm hues like red and orange are great for fall foliage, but for your dining room walls? Not so much. Just like bright light, these colors "make the environment more stimulating, so you'll want to eat and get the heck out," Wansink says. Blues and greens, on the other hand, encourage you to stick around longer (also bad). Go neutral with colors like white, beige, and gray. If your walls are already scarlet and you'd rather eat paint than scan the Benjamin Moore selection at Home Depot, balance the brightness with softer lighting.

5. Hide the remote. A recent American Dietetic Association poll of 1,520 people found that a whopping 91 percent watch TV while eating at home. And if you dine tube-side, you're going to eat more. One Georgia State University study showed that college students consumed almost an entire extra meal's worth of calories on the days they channel surfed. "When you're distracted by the TV, you rely on external cues, like the end of the show, to tell you when to stop eating, instead of stopping when you feel full," Wansink explains.

6. Rock out at the gym, not at the table. A study in the journal Appetite found that participants took an average of 40.5 minutes to finish their meals with music playing, but only 29 without. (And they downed another 450 calories in those extra 11 minutes.) Doesn't matter whether you dig Kenny G or Green Day: Soft music makes you loiter at the table, but you chew faster (and may eat more) when you listen to loud, fast songs. Unplug the stereo and have an actual conversation.

7. Turn off the AC. Heat is a dieter's BFF. When you're cold, "you fuel the furnace by eating," Wansink says. In other words, your body requires more energy to maintain your core temperature when you're chilly—and that energy often comes in the form of French fries.

8. Forget family-style. Except for a platter of fruit or vegetables. Just seeing food makes you likelier to eat it. One study in the journal Nutrition found that subjects who said they didn't want pizza were more inclined to eat a slice anyway when the pie was in front of them than when no food was on display. Keep calorie-dense foods in the kitchen and out of sight.

9. Minimize your menu. You eat as much as 40 percent more when you're given a variety of foods than when you get just one dish, according to research in the Journal of Consumer Research. That's probably because all the choices of color, smell, and taste distract you from noticing when you feel full.

10. Fire up the Viking. The temperature of your food can make as much of a difference as that of the room. "Hot food is more satiating, so you'll eat less of it," Blatner says. Take an extra minute to zap that leftover pizza in the microwave or add something warm (like chicken) to a cold salad.

11. Pick petite plates. Eat your Edy's from a 17-ounce bowl rather than a 34-ouncer and you'll ingest 30 percent fewer calories, according to a study in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. When it comes to plates, use ones that are 8 inches instead of 12. And for flatware, swap your soupspoons for smaller dessert spoons—you'll slurp less.

12. Dust off the highballs and pour yourself a tall one! A study published online in the British Medical Journal found that we pour 32 percent more liquid into short, squat glasses than into tall, skinny ones. It's a classic optical illusion: Equal amounts of liquid appear more voluminous in thin glasses than in wide ones. Use a glass that looks like Uma and you will too.

13. Enjoy your own company. It's sad but true: You eat less when you eat alone. In fact, according to a study in the journal Nutrition, a person consumes 44 percent more when she eats with at least one other person and 76 percent more with seven or more. Fellow diners—many of whom worship the breadbasket—set the pace of the meal, influencing how much you eat. When you do dine en masse, be the last one to start eating and you'll keep calories down. And come armed with good stories: When you're flapping your gums, you can't stuff your face. **WH**