

Growing by Biblical portions: Last Supper paintings over Millennium depict growing appetites

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Professors Brian (pictured) and Craig Wansink teamed up to analyze the amount of food depicted in 52 of the best-known paintings of the Last Supper. They found that portion size, plate size and bread size increased dramatically over the last 1,000 years. Credit: Jason Koski/Cornell Press

The sizes of the portions and plates in more than four dozen depictions of the Last Supper - painted over the past 1,000 years - have gradually grown bigger and bigger, according to a Cornell University study published in *The International Journal of Obesity* (April 2010), a peer-reviewed publication.

The finding suggests that the phenomenon of serving bigger portions on bigger plates - which pushes people to overeat - has occurred gradually over the millennium, says Brian Wansink, the John S. Dyson Professor of Marketing and of Applied Economics and director of the Cornell Food and Brand Lab.

"We took the 52 most famous paintings of the Last Supper (from the book 'Last Supper,' 2000) and analyzed the size of the entrees, bread and plates, relative to the average size of the average head in the painting," said Wansink.

The study found that the size of the entrées in paintings of the Last Supper, which according to the New Testament occurred during a Passover evening, has progressively grown 69 percent; plate size has increased 66 percent and bread size by about 23 percent, over the past 1,000 years.

The research, conducted with Wansink's brother, Craig Wansink, professor of religious studies at Virginia Wesleyan College, Norfolk, Va., and an ordained Presbyterian minister.

The analysis was aided by computer-aided design technology that allowed items in the paintings to be scanned, rotated and calculated regardless of their orientation in the painting.

The researchers started with the assumption that the average width of the bread is twice the width of the average disciple's head.

"The last thousand years have witnessed dramatic increases in the production, availability, safety, abundance and affordability of food," said Cornell's Wansink, author of "Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think." "We think that as art imitates life, these changes have been reflected in paintings of history's most famous dinner."

Provided by Cornell University

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