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Dine & Drive

Helpful hints for the gastronomically mobile.

I was 23 years old when I first learned to drive a car, old enough to be sensibly suspicious of gasoline, sparks, and me in such close proximity. I took 40 hours of driving lessons from an old fart who managed to combine the world's largest repertoire of vaguely sexist jokes with an otherwise calm demeanor and a near-encyclopedic knowledge of the driver's manual. I hated him, but couldn't deny the results: 94 out of 100 on the driver's test and almost embarrassingly correct standards for proper driving behavior. No cell phones, no fiddling with the tape deck except at really long red lights, and above all, no eating while driving.



Sauces are not impossible, only incredibly unpleasant if you make a miscalculation. Dip at stop lights or on straight-aways.

This was an essential part of my teacher's approach to risk assessment. Everything that didn't involve scanning the road and firmly gripping the wheel at 10 and 2 o'clock means sure death to you and your loved ones. In his world, eating while driving made about as much sense as brushing your teeth while driving, with the same potential for making a mess.

Well, now, years have passed, and my God, how my mighty principles have fallen. I still check over my shoulder before changing lanes, but many of those other rules have drifted out the window. Yes, I have joined the ranks of the gastronomically mobile.

The list of what I have eaten while hurtling down the freeway at 75 miles per hour is no doubt mild by current community standards, but it shocks the hell out of me when I think about it. A Reuben sandwich with extra dressing. Sweet and sour soup. An ice-cream bar in 95-degree weather. Curried chicken, including the marrow from the bones, which normally demands a delicate operation using both sets of fingers, several napkins, and, if possible, a finger bowl.

Please, don't write to lecture me. In spite of the reckless and eclectic nature of the foods on this list, I actually do have some sense of the risks involved, and have developed a set of ground rules. I offer them today not to encourage others to start eating and driving, but to make the combination safer and less slovenly for those who already do.

1) The proper setting of the dining table is crucial, whether you're eating off of antique oak or sun-faded plastic. If you are lucky, you have an older car, with a nice wide, flat expanse of dashboard. I don't give two cold fries for those newer models with the individually heated cup holders in the leather-padded arm rests. Their dashboards are sleek, smooth, and utterly useless for stabilizing food. Unwrap everything and put it within easy reaching distance. Even before the key goes in the ignition, safety seals should be snapped, wrappers untucked, and straws unwrapped and

thrust securely into the soft drink lid. Large pieces of food should be broken up, cut up, or otherwise separated into bite-size chunks. Napkins should be tucked up into the seat next to you or between your thigh and your seat.

2) No matter how crude you might feel for eating with your fingers in front of the entire rush-hour population, don't let it bother you too much. The car is a gray area between private and public space, so using fingers is acceptable. No, it's required. Even sporks can do some damage at 20 miles per hour. And the hand-eye coordination is just too complex. Under no circumstances should one attempt chopsticks.

3) "Stick foods" are good: corn dogs, chicken drumsticks, Popsicles. Same with pocket food: egg rolls, burritos, empanadas.

4) Experiment, experiment, experiment. You don't know what you can get away with. For example, sauces are not impossible, only incredibly unpleasant if you make a miscalculation. Dip at stop lights or on straight-aways.

5) Don't be afraid to use a shotgun, I mean, to use the person riding shotgun. This person's responsibility is to do that which cannot be done by the hand that holds the steering wheel. They are the bearer of the French fry bag, the peeler of oranges, the extractor of the last piece of candy from the bottom of the bag, placing it, unwrapped, into your blindly outstretched hands.

6) Clean up after yourself right away. You are the one who will notice it later, when you're scrabbling around under the seat looking for the flashlight or that knob off the glove compartment, and you discover the remains of your sandwich from a month ago. We've been riding our luck for a while, opening juice containers and swigging it down while gripping the wheel with one pinky and shifting into fifth gear. We don't want to push our luck on something so simple as hygiene.

ew

Marina Wolf of San Francisco is a retired food writer currently encouraging large people to boogie at www.bigmoves.org