Common Meals in Cohousing Communities

An Experienced Cohousser Reports from Common House Kitchens and Dining Rooms across North America

by Joani Blank

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wenty-seven and counting. That’s the number of North American cohousing communities I’ve been privileged to visit in the last five years. Then there’s the one I inhabited for eight years (Doyle Street), the one I stayed at for a two-week summer vacation (Pioneer Valley), and my present cohomo (Old Oakland) to which I moved in the Spring of 2000.

In almost all of these wonderful communities I’ve sniffed around to learn about the arrangements residents have made for common meals. I’ve been fortunate to eat common meals in perhaps a dozen of them.

For me, cohousing without at least one common meal each week isn’t cohousing.

and I can’t imagine living happily for very long in a community that made a decision to abandon sharing meals. But I wondered how communities across North America handled their common meal systems.

To satisfy my culinary and organizational curiosity, I facilitated the common meals workshop at the 1999 North American Cohousing Conference, during which residents of eight cohousing communities shared information about their meal systems. I also collected information on common meals this Fall through an e-mail survey posted on Cohousing-L, the Network’s listserv. I received data from eleven additional communities this way, for a total of 39.

So what did I want to know? I wanted the scoop on questions like: How often do you eat? Who cooks and who cleans? How do you sign up? How do you pay? What do you like and dislike about your system? The actual survey questions are listed in the accompanying survey box, as are some useful community statistic, and a list of participating communities. The data collected from the survey, what folks told me, and observations from community visits over the years have confirmed my intuition that...
COMMON MEAL SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. How many people live in your community? Who cooks? (Everyone? If not, who doesn’t?) Who eats? (Can a member eat and not cook?)

2. How many common meals/week are served? Average number of eaters/diners? Do what days of the week? How often does each person serve a cooking team? How many on a team? Do the same or different people cook and clean up?

3. How is payment for meals structured? Do people pay a fixed price for a meal? If so, how much is it? Or does the price vary according to the cost of the meal?

4. How do you handle late plates and leftovers?

5. How do you deal with the variety of food needs (including different meals for young children)?

6. What works best in the way your common meal preparation and cleanup is done, and where is the biggest need for improvement?

7. What else would you like to say about common meals in your community that I’ve forgotten to inquire about?

PARTICIPATING COMMUNITIES

The information summarized in this article comes from the following cohousing communities: Cambridge Cohousing (MA), Doyle Street Cohousing (CA), Monterey Cohousing (MN), Harmony Village (CO), Watach Commons (UT), Cardiff Place (British Columbia), Highline Crossing (CO), Berkeley Cohousing (CA), Marsh Commons (CA), Sunward Cohousing (MI), Nomad Cohousing (CO), New View Cohousing (MA), Old Oakland Cohousing (CA), Pioneer Valley Cohousing (MA), Sonoma (WA), Two Acre Wood (CA), Winslow Cohousing (WA), Pinkari (Australia), and Eno Commons (NC).

COMMUNITY STATISTICS

No. of Participating Communities: 19.

No. of people (adults and kids) living in communities surveyed: 2 to 99; no. of kids: 3 to 35.

No. of communities with 24 to 38 residents: 10.

No. of communities with 54 to 66 residents: 3.

No. of communities with 78 to 99 residents: 5.

No. of communities which expect every adult to plan, prepare and/or clean up after common meals: 8; no. of communities with volunteer system: 11.

Average percent of residents who eat common meals: in the three largest communities: 35-65%; in the six smallest: 59-70%.

Frequency of community common meals each week: 1-5; most communities have either 2 or 3.

Average cost per meal: $2.50 - $3.50 per adult, kids: half price; up to $5.00 for “very special occasions” (lowest ever listed: $1.85, highest: $7.00).

No. of communities whose kitchen teams cooks and cleans up: 6; no. of communities that separate cooking and cleaning: 3.

... common meals are for most, if not all residents, “the glue that holds us together.”

I share these findings with you here, including direct quotes from people I have interviewed in person, or those who responded to the Coho-L survey. They are not all-inclusive, but I do hope they are helpful and representative of the many approaches being taken by communities for common meals around North America.

Who Cooks? Who Cleans? Who Eats?

In about half of the communities I surveyed, every adult is expected to plan, prepare and/or clean up after common meals.

In the other half, common meal preparation is voluntary. Well, in a few of the former, common meal prep is hypothetically “mandatory” but in effect is dependent on volunteers, and in some cases that’s nowhere near everyone.

In most of the communities where meal preparation is voluntary, everyone is welcome to eat any number of common meals. But in two, only people who cook/clean, and their families, are permitted to eat any common meals.

A resident of one of those communities says:

“We did a good thing when we separated meals from all other community activities. Those who wish to dine do so, and know that they need to pay for the privilege, both through work and by paying for their share of the meal cost.”
How Many People Eat Those Yummy Common Dinners?

Communities whose common meal preparation is voluntary typically have fewer common meals, and their schedule tends to be more irregular. Attendance at common meals is also lower. Smaller communities tend to attract more meal participants. In the three largest communities, an average of 43% of residents enjoy common meals, whereas in the six smaller communities the average meal attracts over 65%.

"Since our community is small, common dinners feel pretty much like family dinners to me."

The resident of a 100-member community says:

"Even though we serve most of our dinners family-style, and the food is much better, eating in the common house too often reminds me of meals in summer camp or in my college cafeteria."

...and,

"Our common meals are usually pretty tasty, but our dining room is so noisy that I don't eat there as often as I'd like to."

It has occurred to me that in a really large community, common dinners might work better, and therefore attract more diners, if the group were divided in two. One group could cook and eat together on two week-ends, the second could cook and eat on two different week nights. Perhaps then, to round out the week, a Sunday buffet lunch or dinner for everyone, extending over a couple of hours could be prepared. Has any community tried a system similar to this?

How Often Shall We Break Bread Together?

Of the 19 communities I surveyed, 12 have either two or three common meals per week, about evenly divided between those who do two and those who do three. One community has four, and one topped at five meals weekly. Several others have one or two "regular" community dinners plus one or more potluck(s), pizza night(s), leftovers dinner(s), and in one case a couple of specialized eating groups (e.g., vegan, carnivore, all-adult). Although these groups are open to all residents, they manage their cooking/cleaning and eating separately from the "main" system. Whatever the number of meals served, in any given community, some residents think it's way too many, while others think it is not nearly enough.

As a rule, families with one or more school-age children and single adults are those most desirous of frequent common meals.
When we moved in, our common kitchen wasn’t finished, so for many months we held potlucks every night of the week. When our kitchen was done and we started having meals prepared there, several families continued the potlucks on non-common-dinner nights, and we still have some kind of shared eating going on in the common house five or six nights a week."

Signing Up
All but two groups have a notebook or sheet posted where residents and their guests can “sign up” to alert the cooks how many will be eating a particular meal. The two remaining groups have a sign-out system whereby you are assumed to be attending every common meal unless you sign yourself out. Not surprisingly, more residents eat more meals more of the time.

“A two year-old in our community used to earnestly ask each of those she saw gathering for a common dinner, ‘are you signed up?’ She kept us honest and on our toes.”

One community has a system of no-sign up, just show up. Their payment system is described in the “Paying Up” section below.

Whether or not Friday is a “good” night for a common meal is warmly contested in some communities. The pro-Friday crowd thinks common dinner is a great way to start the weekend, and may plan after-dinner board games, or a video night. The anti-Friday folks either want to collapse at home after a stressful work week, or they want to go out on the town. Differences about the scheduling and timing of common meals are most often apparent between those households that include one or more school-age children and those that do not.

“We tried to change our meal nights but ended up going back to the original schedule because we were so used to it, and because those days worked better for more of us.”

“It’s unpredictable when I have to stay late at work, and I’m really exhausted when I get home, so I appreciate it when those with less demanding jobs or those who work at home leave a Sunday-cooking slot open for me.”

Most groups I talked to extend flexibility among community members when it comes to scheduling, spotting each other, and filling in when there’s an emergency.

Paying Up
“First we tried a system like I understand they use in Danish cohousing where everyone reimburses the cook—for the groceries bought for the meal—in cash right after the meal. That was not very workable since one diner always had to go home to get her checkbook, another needed change for $20, another asked me to remember that he owed me for the dinner.

Then someone worked out a simple spreadsheet which keeps track of what meals are eaten by whom, at what cost per meal. Periodically the total is added to or subtracted from the amount spent by each cook during that same time period. Then each one of us is reimbursed or billed for the difference.”

This system of paying for common meals is similar to one used in many other communities.

How much do common meals cost? Here’s a hint: It’s way less than any restaurant, including most fast food joints. In communities with a set price for meals, price ranges from $2.50 to $3.50 per person, usually with half-price for most children.
to feed 30-35 diners.) Everyone else just shows up to eat any one of the six or seven meals served per month. Residents pay only when they cook.

I thought about this some more and although I'm really attracted to this system because of its simplicity, it doesn't seem all that fair. Since they have so few meals, it seems that even someone who eats every meal still ends up spending an average of $4.50 per meal, while someone who only gets to a couple of meals in the rotation may in effect be paying $13 to $16 for them. Also, since the kids don't cook, the adults without kids are substantially subsidizing meals for families with children.

How Much is Enough?

"It took us a while to figure out how much to cook. Now most of us are getting the hang of it, but once in a while there's not nearly enough or, more typically, too much of at least one dish in a meal."

Although cohousers get pretty good at judging amounts after making a few really big mistakes in this area, leftovers are a ubiquitous feature of common meals. Some groups distribute leftovers right after the meal, or the cooks and cleaners take them home themselves, depending on the quantity left. Some groups ask their members to pay for leftovers at least that evening or during the next day, although usually leftovers are free for the taking either the next morning or later the next day. Generally speaking, cohousers don't like to see food wasted, so if the leftovers are plentiful, cooks will urge everyone to take food home with them, or will confer with cooks for the next meal about a creative way to incorporate them.

Sorry, I Can't Eat That

All communities are attentive to some degree to special food needs and allergies. Almost all maintain a list of these considerations posted in the kitchen. Everyone in the community is usually made aware of life-threatening allergies, and after a while remembers, without looking at the list, who can't eat dairy products or wheat, who is a vegetarian or a vegan, for example.

Some communities require that cooks list every ingredient in every dish. Minimally, diners want to know whether or not meat or cheese appears in a dish. What seems to be important to most cohousers is that special food needs are acknowledged and respected. I found that most do not feel that every special food requirement needs to be indulged at every common meal. Of course, if the cheese or chicken or nuts are not integral to the recipe, cooks will often just serve them on the side.
"If the main course of a meal is something I can’t eat, I’ll usually bring a plate of leftovers from my house to the common house, so I can hang out with my neighbors during dinner."

"To be honest, I find that catering to everyone’s special food needs the way we do here is a pain. I wish that people would just sign up for dinner if the menu includes something they can’t (or don’t like to) eat. That’s what I do."

Enough vegetarians live in cohousing that most groups include a vegetarian main dish at all or virtually all meals. Even when a minority of members are vegetarian, many of the common meals include no meat. All but a few of our cohousing carnivores are quite willing to eat vegetarian meals several times a week.

"Although I’m a meat eater, I really like that so many of our common meals are vegetarian, because I think it’s a much healthier way to eat. I have gained weight since I lived here, though, because there’s so much food and because we have sweet desserts much more often than is good for me. Then there’s the pesky box of ice cream sandwiches that often resides in the freezer."

**Kids Eat Common Meals Too**

Anyone who has served meals to children knows that their idea of a tasty “balanced meal” may not be the same as an adult’s. In a few of the larger communities, which have a lot of children, a kid-friendly meal is sometimes or always available alongside the adult meals. It may be a completely separate meal, or a separate main dish. In others, peanut butter and jelly sandwich makings, plain pasta or rice are routinely available. There are parents who feel that their children should learn to eat adult food, and wish that “kid food” was not quite so readily available at every common meal, but for the most part these same parents would rather see their children eat a jelly sandwich than nothing at all, so they are pretty relaxed about it.

"Some kids rarely stop moaning, mine included—she hates ‘hicky’ food. I’m encouraging the older moaners to join a cooking crew."

"My parents were cooking together last night, and at my request they made homemade macaroni and cheese for everyone. Some of the adults thought it was really weird that I like ketchup on mac and cheese, but a few of the braver ones tried it and thought it was pretty good."

Some of the negotiations around common meals for kids have more to do with the level of noise and activity than the food:

"We instituted a rule that kids who are allowed to leave the table earlier than others, may not pester the slower eaters to leave the table to play."

"We encourage kids to sit with their parent(s), but at certain ages they are really insistent about sitting with their age mates."

At several communities, the parents tried a kids’ table, but found out that the children eat better if they are sitting with their parents or other adults.

**Family-Style or Buffet?**

Most cohousing communities I’ve surveyed and visited prefer to serve common meals family-style. In the larger communities, family-style serving is virtually a necessity, since no one likes either the image or the actuality of long lines waiting to get to the buffet table or counter. Cohousers seem to prefer that common meals evoke eating with friends in our homes than mobs in a school or workplace cafeteria. On the other hand, family-style dining requires more serving dishes, to which those responsible for serving and cleaning up after the meal sometimes object.

"In theory we like family-style dining because it is calmer and cozier than the buffet, but most chefs and cleanup crews don’t want to deal with divvying up food and gathering and washing all those extra bowls and platters, so we usually don’t serve meals family style."

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*Photo: Zev Paris*
Funny Thing about Cleaning Up:
You Have to Do it After Every Meal

Big meals make big messes. Or at least they can. In about one third of the communities I’ve visited and learned about, a team of two to four people plans, prepares, sets up, and cleans up after a meal. In the other two-thirds, cooking and cleanup slots are signed up for separately. Certainly, having the same people cooking and cleaning up makes a really long evening for those doing the work. However, residents who do it this way perceive two distinct advantages. First, they like the fact that this system requires fewer nights “on-duty” per month or per rotation. Second (and in most people’s minds more importantly) no one likes to clean up after a messy cook. The inclination to leave the common kitchen untidy might be just a bit stronger if you know someone else is doing cleanup.

“It’s stressful enough to cook and serve dinner. After all the food is out, I just want to sit down, eat, and chat with my family and/or my neighbors. I can’t imagine also having to stay around until the last dish is in the dishwasher, pots and pans washed and the floors swept. I’d rather leave cleanup to those who don’t want to cook or who really enjoy cleaning up.”

“Here cooking and cleaning are separate jobs, but some sign up for both on the same night because it works better with their schedules, or because they like to get their common meal obligations out of the way, and have more meals where they can eat and run, or just sit and visit with neighbors.”

Communities with a coordinating kitchen committee find that both cooking and cleanup go more smoothly.

“We have a kitchen committee separate from the daily cooks that keeps tabs on cleanliness in the kitchen. They also replenish staples when they get low, replace broken or disappeared items, and purchase items requested by cooks. The kitchen committee’s work makes the cooking/cleaning tasks easier, and is an important factor in having the meal system run smoothly.”

Of course, getting cleanup crews is not always easy if your community has a system where cooking and cleaning are separate tasks.

“It’s really hard to get people to sign up for cleanup, and it seems like many of those who do it, do so grudgingly.”

Where cooking and cleanup are done by the same two or three people, the cooks find that careful planning ahead makes the job much less onerous:

“Even if I have to work on a day when I’m the head cook, I can do most of the preparation for the main dish the night before, and ask my assistant cook to set the tables and start the salad. The two of us are responsible for the cleanup too, but even with that, we are usually finished well before nine.”

But I Can’t Cook

Every community starts out with a person or two who insists that he or she cannot possibly learn to cook, especially for a crowd. But in communities where everyone is expected to cook, I’ve found that there is always willingness to bring “non-cooks” up to speed by pairing them up with more experienced, or at least more fearless, cooks. One timid cook who had overcome her “fear of cooking” said:

“At first I found it very stressful to cook a community meal. But over time I learned how to plan a meal around basic dishes that most people like and are easier to prepare for a larger group.”

(Watch out now, simple multiplication system doesn’t always work—better to use a recipe book with recipes meant to serve large groups. Moosewood cooks for a crowd is a cohousing favorite. If you don’t believe me, just try cooking five pounds of spaghetti in a big pot the way same way you’d cook half a pound.)

(Continued on page 34)
Where Are We Now; Where Are We Going?

I have included here only experiences from one third of our up-and-running communities. Surely, some communities not surveyed have creative solutions to common meal challenges not even mentioned here. However, from my experience and the information sent in response to our survey, I suggest that communities where the greatest number of residents seem most satisfied with their common meals, and where the attendance is highest are likely to share the following characteristics:

- Meals are regularly scheduled on the same nights every week.
- Every adult resident participates in preparation of (and cleanup after) common meals on a rotating basis.
- A minimum of two (non-potluck) common meals are prepared every week.
- Meals are usually served family-style (most or all courses).
- The same people who plan and cook a meal are responsible for cleanup after the meal.
- Folks are flexible, willing to help one another, tolerant of an occasional disappointing meal (even then appreciative of the cooks’ efforts), and lavish with their compliments to the cooks when praise is warranted.

Editor’s Note:
We do not claim to have a random sample of the close-to-55 cohousing communities now up and running in North America, but perhaps a representative one. We recognize that some factors not mentioned in this article are important to a successful common meal plan. Therefore, we would like to publish a follow-up article based on your questions, your reactions to what you have read here, and further comments about your experiences with common meals. Please submit comments and questions to: Editor, CoHousing Journal, P.O. Box 515, Cambridge, MA 02238; or e-mail us at: cobomag@cohousing.org.

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