

A Computer in the Kitchen

The late President Gerald Ford had a simple philosophy of life: “Tell the truth, work hard, and come to dinner on time.”

In the middle of our own chaotic schedules, we sometimes forget the value of meals as social events. It’s around the table that families reweave the connections that make them a family. And later in life, when solitary meals become the norm for many, the costs are likely to be both psychological and medical.

The single chair at the table has become a research topic for Accenture Technology Labs’ Online Health Services. In the middle of January, the tech consulting company came up with something they call the Virtual Family Dinner. In a press release, Accenture noted that “more than five million Americans care for older family members who live at least an hour away.” One solution—bring the “live presence” of relatives and friends into the kitchens of those living alone, at least for the dinner hour.

The technical requirements are relatively simple. A broadband connection, wall or ceiling-mounted miniature cameras, and a screen (as transparent as a window when not in use) that can pop up at the end of the table, or near it, when it’s time to sit down for



dinner. The software would manage the connection and could “run through a directory of preregistered family members and friends to find someone who is ‘available for dinner.’”

Accenture Labs in Chicago has plans to work with a university to measure the effects of its Virtual Family Dinner on “the quality and quantity of food consumed,” frequent health issues for those living alone. Dadong Wan, Accenture researcher, believes a prototype will be ready, possibly within two years, and that the cost will be somewhere between \$500 to \$1,000 per installation.

Once in place, virtual diners might need one more line in the Ford formula: “Don’t forget to boot up when you put the soup on.” ■