

3c | Competitive eating

SPEAKING

- 1 Read the following information.



The photo shows Korean-born American Sonya Thomas, who takes part in competitive eating contests. These involve consuming large quantities of food such as hot dogs or apple pie in a short period of time, usually twelve minutes or less. Sonya holds over 20 eating records and earns as much as \$60,000 a year.

- 2 Work in pairs, Pairs A and Pairs B. You are going to prepare for an interview with Sonya Thomas.

Pairs A: Turn to page 141 and prepare your questions.
Pairs B: Turn to page 152 and prepare your answers.

- 3 Change pairs, so that a student from a Pair A and a student from a Pair B work together. Roleplay the interview.

READING

- 1 Read the article. Which of the questions asked in your roleplay above are answered in the text?

- 2 Read the text again and decide whether the following are true or false.

- The writer suggests that Sonya's achievements are surprising.
- In Baltimore she is attempting to regain a record she recently lost.
- Early success encouraged her to participate in more eating contests.
- The writer says that the thinner a person is, the better they will be at competitive eating.
- The first eating contest was held some six years ago.
- In Baltimore, contestants are not allowed to drink during the contest.
- Doctors are always present at competitive eating contests.
- Sonya is unhappy with her performance in Baltimore.

Me and my big mouth

When you first see Sonya Thomas you wonder whether she might be blown away by the breeze that is bouncing off Baltimore's inner harbour this bright and sunny morning. She is a very slim woman indeed, just seven stones zero by her own reckoning, and around 5ft 5in*. Yet as unlikely as it seems, Sonya, or 'The Black Widow' as she calls herself, is America's number one eater.

What is even more remarkable is that Sonya is the overall eating champion – not just in the skinny women category. She routinely destroys men more than twice her size, wolfing down her food as they stand nauseated and unable to push any more into their mouths. To give some idea of this woman's ability, consider just some of the records she currently holds: 552 oysters in ten minutes, 5.95lbs of meatballs in twelve minutes, 162 chicken wings in twelve minutes, and 52 hard-boiled eggs in five minutes. Last August in Harrington, Delaware, Sonya ate an astonishing 40 crabcakes in twelve minutes. It is that record she is here this morning to defend, or rather, to break. She has a plan to make it happen. 'It's actually easier if you can dunk them in water,' she confides.

Her first try at competitive eating came in 2003 during a qualifier for the World Cup of competitive eating – the 4 July hot dog challenge at Coney Island. In that qualifier Sonya managed eighteen dogs, giving her a slot in the final where she ate 25, which was a new record for women eaters. 'I didn't know I was good at this,' she says. 'The first time I did it, it was just for fun. It just came out good so I thought, "OK, let's do it!"'

Many have pondered Sonya's talent. One idea is the 'band of fat theory', which suggests larger eaters struggle to expand their stomachs because they are constrained by the fat. They point out that the world champion eater, the near-legendary Takeru Kobayashi of Japan, is also as skinny as Sonya. Dedication is also a factor. Sonya regularly practises for contests.

The so-called sport of eating contests – while dating back decades to events held at county fairs around the country – has only really had a national profile for the last half-dozen years since being sponsored by the International Federation of Competitive Eating, a New York marketing company which 'governs' a 100 or so events and annually pays out \$250,000 in prize money.

On a stage alongside the harbour, the lightly grilled crabcakes, made from blue crab meat and a number of other ingredients, are set on metal trays and placed on tables. Each crabcake has 160 calories. The judge – 'Hungry' Charles Hardy, a former competitive eater himself – has some disturbing news for Sonya. There will be no dunking of the crabcakes in water, he declares. 'It's too hard to measure.'

Hardy reveals that, as at every eating contest, there are medics on hand. While there are no studies showing actual proven dangers, doctors have warned of the potential risks of speed eating and

in Japan – another stronghold of competitive eating – several people choked to death during contests in the 1990s.

It's time to get started. As the biggest name at the contest Sonya comes on last and stands centre-stage. She licks her fingers. The countdown begins. They're off. Sonya grabs a handful of crabcake and pushes it into her mouth. It is gone in an instant and she pushes in more, masticating like a machine. She eats with one hand, using the other to take sips from a bottle. After one minute it is announced she has eaten eight.

All around her are scenes of farce and horror. Food and water and a combination of the two drip down faces as the contestants seek to push in more. Nine minutes in and Sonya has eaten 43 crabcakes. The last seconds are excruciating and messy as the competitors try to force in a few last mouthfuls. It looks terribly painful. Then, at last, it is over.

There is a pause as the judges add up the numbers. And then it is announced that Sonya has eaten 46 crabcakes. It is a new record. She is thrilled. 'I went very fast at the start. Then after about five or six minutes, I slowed down,' she says. 'I feel OK – I could eat more.'

She stands for photographs, a huge smile across her face and her skinny arms holding the oversized prize-winner's cheque above her head.

*7 stones = 44 kilograms; 5ft 5in = 1m 65cm

- 3 Match each of the highlighted verbs in the text to the definitions 1–8.

- tell someone a secret
- pick something up suddenly and roughly
- eat very quickly
- chew
- put food into liquid before eating it
- make something wet with one's tongue
- think about something carefully
- be unable to breathe because your airway is blocked

- 4 Work in pairs. Discuss the following questions.

- What type of criticism do you think competitive eating comes in for? What is your own reaction to such contests?
- Do you consider competitive eating to be a sport? Why or why not?

VOCABULARY: excess

- 1 Work in pairs and discuss the following. Use a dictionary if necessary.



- How often do you do the following?
 - overeat
 - oversleep
 - go overdrawn
- Which of these adjectives apply to you?
 - overworked
 - overtired
 - oversensitive
- Give examples of the following:
 - a film which is overrated
 - a profession which is overpaid
 - a person who is overexposed on television
 - something you bought which was overpriced

- 2 Complete the sentences with a preposition from the box.

in in of over to to with

- There are no easy solutions to the growing problem of **binge-drinking**, the practice among young people of **drinking ___ excess**.
 - People who drive at **speeds ___ excess ___** 120kph should lose their licence for six months.
 - Sexual equality is all very well but some people **take it ___ extremes**.
 - Junk mail is not effective: **bombarding** people ___ information, advice and offers leads to **overkill** and people stop reading it.
 - It's alright for films to have some violence, but some really do **go ___ the top**.
 - '**Moderation ___ all things**': that's the best way to live life.
- 3 Work in pairs. Discuss the statements in exercise 2.