

# Restaurant Diner Beware...

## Looking Past the Healthy Dining Hype

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Eating out is common for so many of us with our busy, can't-catch-a-break lifestyles. This can present challenges for those of us who want to maintain a healthy lifestyle, Restaurants are adding more healthful menu options every day, but some carry "healthy halos" and may not be as nutritious as they seem.

Here are some ways to look past the hype and become a savvy healthy diner.

### 1) Diner Beware

#### **Full service restaurants not necessarily healthier than fast food**

So many of us believe that full-service, sit-down restaurants are healthier than fast food, but this is not always the case. In fact, in a study published in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, researchers reviewed more than 2,600 menu items at full-service restaurant chains. They found that many of these restaurants exceed the recommended calories, sodium, and saturated fat for a single meal.

#### **The "Healthy Choice" may not always be healthy**

In the restaurant world, "healthy" is a rather ambiguous description, and the criteria used to define "healthy" varies from restaurant to restaurant. Some use "healthy" to mean minimally processed and free from artificial additives and preservatives. Others define it as low fat, low salt, or low sugar, and some define it as being high in protein, fiber or other essential nutrients. This can create confusion for diners. If the definition is unclear to you, don't be afraid to ask the restaurant what they mean by "healthy" to determine if it meets your requirements.

## **Fresh, organic, natural, local and sustainable does not necessarily mean healthy**

More and more restaurants are now offering fresh, made-from-scratch items, and becoming “clean” by removing all additives and preservatives from their offer. Although these initiatives are noteworthy, they don’t necessarily mean that all their menu items are nutritious. A “freshly made grass fed burger” can still be loaded with saturated fat, calories and sodium. “Organic” brownies are still high-sugar, high-fat brownies. “Natural, hand-cut” fries are still deep fried. And a “clean” smoothie, free from all artificial additives and preservatives can still be packed with sugar.

## **Vegetarian meals can be loaded with fat, sugar and salt**

From lacto-vegetarians and vegans, to pesco-vegetarian and flexitarians, there are many different types of vegetarian diets. But the one thing they all have in common is the potential for lots of hidden calories, fats, refined carbohydrates and sodium. Foods like nuts, seeds, olives, avocados and many oils are staples of a vegan diet, and they are heart-healthy, but they are also packed with calories. Grains are not always in the “whole” form and sugar and salt can be added ad lib to vegetarian meals. So, if you think that “skipping the meat” means leaving most of the calories behind, think again. For example, “Amy’s”, a drive through vegetarian restaurant, offers a signature Vegetarian Burger, that has a whopping 750 calories, 38 grams of fat and 1580 milligrams of sodium which is equivalent of eating a big mac plus an order of french fries at McDonald’s.

## **Hidden names**

If you’re making a healthy choice, you’re probably not purposely choosing a fried food item. Not only does frying pack on the calories, but many restaurants fry in partially hydrogenated oil which contains trans fats. Instead of the word “fried”, restaurants can choose to use other words such as “crunchy, tempura, battered, crispy, breaded, crusted, and golden.

If you are trying to watch your calories, the following descriptive words can mean “high calorie”: *loaded, stuffed, creamy, cheesy, gooey, smothered, melted, rich and velvety.*

## **2) Be in the Know**

The following are some easy tips to making sound healthy choices when dining out.

### **Fast Food and Quick Casual**

General tips:

- Replace “fancy” breads such as focaccia and cheese breads with plainer ones to avoid lots of extra sodium and saturated fat.
- Order dressings, spreads and other high fat toppings on the side, or request the lower fat versions. Many

restaurants use generous amounts of these condiments, causing the calories to skyrocket. As an example, a typical Grilled Chicken Caesar Salad has 700-800 calories, more than half of which comes from the dressing alone.

- Order your items with extra vegetables either on the side, or as toppings.

### Great choices are:

- Grilled chicken wraps, turkey and vegetable small subs, grilled chicken salads with light dressing
- Regular or junior sized roast beef sandwiches, turkey burgers, hamburgers and veggie burgers (single patty, hold the sauce)
- Soft tacos with beef or chicken
- Broth based soups (i.e., chicken noodle, minestrone, vegetable)
- Baked potatoes with chili topping (light on the cheese)
- Thin crust varieties of pizza and keep to plain cheese or cheese and vegetables. Compliment 1 slice (1/6 of an 18-inch pie) with a large salad made with low fat dressing.

### Full Service: Family and Fine Dining

- Choose items that have the following descriptive words, which indicate healthier preparation methods: “roasted, baked, braised, broiled, poached, rubbed, seared, grilled, and steamed”.
- Ask for cream sauces to the side or replace them with tomato-based sauces.
- Request that the meal be prepared with less fat and more vegetables. Chefs love to see the meal “shine” as it leaves the kitchen, and they make it shine with plenty of butter, margarine, or oil. It is not uncommon for fish to be prepared with 1/3 stick butter, adding an extra 500-550 calories. Even the healthier oils such as olive and canola oil add the same number of calories as butter and lard.
- Keep the 50, 25, 25 mix in mind as indicated on the chart to the right. That means filling half your plate with fruits and/or vegetables, one quarter of the plate as the protein or dairy source and the remaining quarter with complex carbohydrates (i.e., grains, potatoes or corn).
- Keep desserts to ones that contain a lot of fresh fruit. Share large portions with others or bring the leftovers home.

