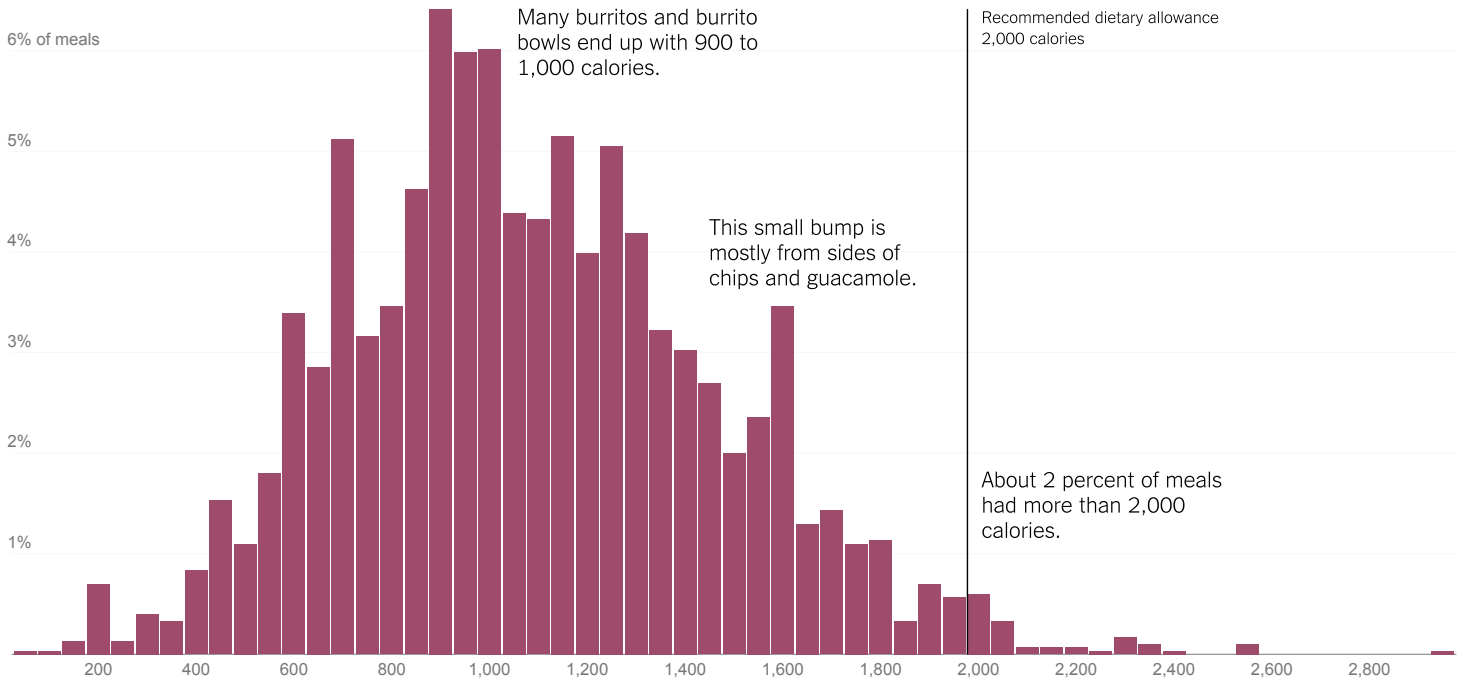


# At Chipotle, How Many Calories Do People Really Eat?

By [KEVIN QUEALY](#), [AMANDA COX](#) and [JOSH KATZ](#) FEB. 17, 2015

Most meals have more than 1,000 calories and almost a full day's worth of sodium. [Related Article](#)



When you step into a typical chain restaurant, you have a wide array of meal options, ranging from fairly healthful to downright gluttonous. This is particularly true at the rapidly growing type of restaurants known as fast casual, like Chipotle, where you can order a burrito many thousands of ways.

With the help of a large sample of online orders, we set out to answer a question that piques our interest every time we walk into a Chipotle (which is a lot): What do people actually order here? How healthy is a normal Chipotle meal?

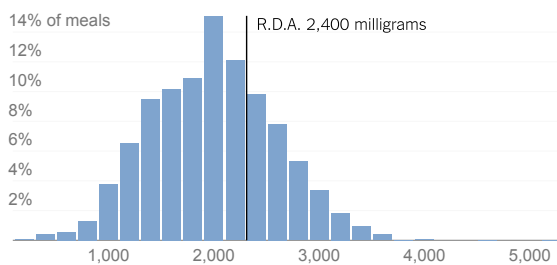
Today, we have a ballpark estimate. The typical order at Chipotle has about 1,070 calories. That's more than half of the calories that most adults are supposed to eat in an entire day. The recommended range for most adults is between 1,600 and 2,400.

The histogram above shows the distribution of calories for all orders. The spike around 1,000 calories represents “standard” burrito orders – a meat burrito with typical additions: cheese, salsa, lettuce, sour cream, rice and beans. If you order a meat burrito at Chipotle with these toppings, it's [very likely to reach](#) 1,000 calories.

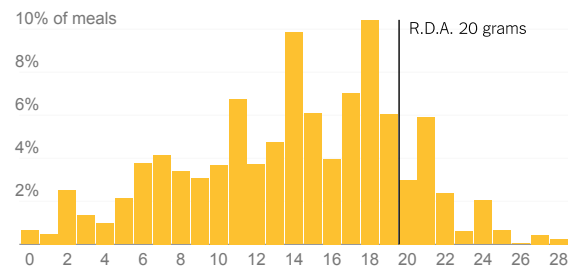
But there's so much more to this data than the averages. Chipotle customers can and do order meals with fewer than 650 calories, such as a cheese-free burrito bowl. On the other end of the spectrum, about one in 10 meals had more than 1,600 calories.

The distributions of two other metrics of a meal's health — salt and saturated fat, shown in the charts below — are just as revealing. Most orders at Chipotle give you close to a full day's worth of salt ([2,400 milligrams](#)) and 75 percent of a full day's worth of saturated fat.

**Milligrams of sodium per order**



**Grams of saturated fat per order**



Chris Arnold, Chipotle's communications director, said the company is aware of the nutrition of all its ingredients, but doesn't track information about each order. "We don't manage our menu around individual nutrients," he said.

Below, a variety of actual meals across the calorie distribution, based on over 3,000 meals ordered on [GrubHub](#). It's some of the most detailed information yet published on what people actually order – not just what's on the menu.

## Meals around 545 calories

About 5 percent of meals had this many calories or fewer.



**Steak crispy tacos**

Calories	<b>535</b>
Saturated fat	<b>60%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>25%</b> of daily

Fresh tomato salsa, sour cream



**Veggie bowl**

Calories	<b>535</b>
Saturated fat	<b>60%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>46%</b> of daily

Rice, pinto beans, fresh tomato salsa, sour cream, cheese



**Carnitas burrito**

Calories	<b>545</b>
Saturated fat	<b>35%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>70%</b> of daily

Tomatillo red chili salsa (nothing else)

Chipotle declined to give us data, but Mr. Arnold did give us a few facts about what people order, which broadly matched our data. The most common protein is chicken, Mr. Arnold said; the most common “vessel” is a burrito bowl rather than a burrito tortilla or taco; and the most common salsa is fresh tomato, he said. Using those examples, he cited a potential meal: a burrito bowl with white rice, black beans, chicken, fresh tomato salsa, sour cream and lettuce, which comes to about 625 calories. About 90 percent of meals in our data set had more calories than that.

But if staying under 700 calories — about one third of the recommended daily amount for many adults — is your goal, a burrito bowl like the one Mr. Arnold described is your best bet. Only about 2 percent of the burritos in our data — just 25 out of 1,200 burritos in all — were in that calorie range. Why? The tortilla alone gets you to 300 calories.

## Meals around 855 calories

About 25 percent of meals had this many calories or fewer.



**Chicken bowl**

Calories	<b>850</b>
Saturated fat	<b>68%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>65%</b> of daily

Rice, black beans, fresh tomato salsa, sour cream, guacamole



**Veggie burrito**

Calories	<b>860</b>
Saturated fat	<b>48%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>85%</b> of daily

Rice, fajita vegetables, tomatillo green chili salsa, cheese, guacamole, lettuce



**Barbacoa soft tacos**

Calories	<b>880</b>
Saturated fat	<b>88%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>111%</b> of daily

Pinto beans, fresh tomato salsa, roasted chili corn salsa, tomatillo-red chili salsa, cheese, sour cream, lettuce

Slightly higher up the calorie distribution — at about 900 calories, more than in one out of four orders — the options vary considerably, with burritos, bowls, tacos and salads all represented. Burrito bowls with 900 calories tend to have more toppings like cheese, sour cream or guacamole; if you want a burrito in this calorie range, you’ll probably have to go without two of those, perhaps getting extra salsa instead. But even at the 25th percentile, you’re still likely to have a meal with a lot of sodium. The fresh tomato salsa, for example, has just 20 calories, but it has 210 milligrams of sodium — more salt than [a 1 oz. bag](#) of Lay’s potato chips.

## Meals around 1,070 calories

About 50 percent of meals had this many calories or fewer.



**Steak burrito**

Calories	<b>1,045</b>
Saturated fat	<b>68%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>85%</b> of daily

Rice, tomatillo green chili salsa, sour cream, guacamole, lettuce



**Barbacoa burrito**

Calories	<b>1,085</b>
Saturated fat	<b>78%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>109%</b> of daily

Rice, pinto beans, fajita vegetables, roasted chili corn salsa, cheese, sour cream, lettuce



**Chicken burrito**

Calories	<b>1,095</b>
Saturated fat	<b>38%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>98%</b> of daily

Rice, black beans, roasted chili corn salsa, guacamole

It's quite easy to get to 1,070 calories — the median amount of calories per Chipotle order in our data — particularly if you order a meat burrito and don't remove some of the standard toppings, like rice or beans. But all kinds of orders can get across the 1,000-calorie line. Even smaller orders, like bowls or tacos, easily reach the threshold with a side of chips, which deliver 570 calories.

## Meals around 1,350 calories

About 75 percent of meals had this many calories or fewer.



**Chicken soft tacos, chips and guacamole**

Calories	<b>1,330</b>
Saturated fat	<b>88%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>85%</b> of daily

Fresh tomato salsa, cheese, lettuce



**Veggie bowl, chips and guacamole**

Calories	<b>1,330</b>
Saturated fat	<b>93%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>83%</b> of daily

Rice, black beans, fajita veggies, fresh tomato salsa, cheese, sour cream



**Steak bowl, chips and fresh tomato salsa**

Calories	<b>1,340</b>
Saturated fat	<b>88%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>103%</b> of daily

Rice, black beans, fajita veggies, fresh tomato salsa, cheese, sour cream

When the dishes start approaching 1,400 calories — as about one in four did — it's usually because an order contains a side item: chips and salsa, a sugary drink, extra guacamole. Around the 1,600-calorie mark in the histogram above, you can see a small bump: It's a common order of a burrito with chips and guacamole.

Speaking of side items, calories from drinks add up. Twenty ounces of Coke [has 240](#) calories. And, if anything, our estimates may be conservative.

Our data is made up of orders people ate in their homes, their offices or elsewhere outside the restaurant. That means it includes few fountain sodas, which are awkward to deliver. The drinks in our orders are mostly 12-oz. cans. And about 80 percent of meals had no drink at all. Some of them may have added one from their home or workplace, but we miss those calories.



## Meals around 1,790 calories

About 95 percent of meals had this many calories or fewer.



**Barbacoa burrito, chips and guacamole**

Calories	<b>1,770</b>
Saturated fat	<b>110%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>128%</b> of daily

Rice, pinto beans, fresh tomato salsa, cheese, sour cream



**Steak burrito, chips**

Calories	<b>1,790</b>
Saturated fat	<b>85%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>117%</b> of daily

Rice, black beans, roasted chili corn salsa, sour cream, guacamole



**Chicken burrito, chips and guacamole**

Calories	<b>1,795</b>
Saturated fat	<b>113%</b> of daily
Sodium	<b>119%</b> of daily

Rice, black beans, tomatillo-green chili salsa, cheese, sour cream, lettuce

When we published our [photo essay](#) about how to get to 2,000 calories at some of the biggest restaurant chains, Chipotle was represented by a carnitas burrito, chips and guacamole and a Coke. Orders of that size are not common at Chipotle — 98 percent of orders had fewer than 2,000 calories — but they are not unheard of.

The easiest way to get there is to order chips and guacamole: 770 calories. You'll also need to say yes to the toppings — like both cheese and sour cream on a burrito. After a meal like that, you typically will have already reached your daily recommended amount of saturated fat and salt. In most cases, you'll be well on your way to tomorrow's recommended intake, too.

### About the data

The data is based on about 3,000 meals in about 1,800 Grubhub orders from July to December 2012, almost all from two Chipotle restaurants: one in Washington, D.C., and another in East Lansing, Mich. A few caveats are worth keeping in mind: Some menu items, like sofritas and brown rice, have been introduced nationwide more recently and are not in our data. (Mr. Arnold said that brown rice currently accounts for a third of the rice Chipotle sells and that sofritas accounts for about 3 percent of fillings.)

It's also likely that the ordering behavior varies somewhat around the country and that some items have become more or less popular in the last two years or so. But many of the ordering patterns that the company has publicly described — such as chicken being the most popular protein and burrito bowls being more popular than burritos or tacos — matched the patterns in the GrubHub data, and Mr. Arnold said there has not been much significant variation in ordering habits regionally or year-to-year.

We were also forced to make some assumptions with some orders.

We assume people eat only one salad, burrito bowl, burrito or set of tacos at a time. When there's more than one of those items in an order, we assume it's for more than one person. And we assume that groups of people who order together split side items, like chips. That's probably untrue — there's always one guy who eats more — but assumptions about chip division don't have a huge impact on the overall shape of our histogram.

Photographs by Sam Hodgson for The New York Times; Alan McLean contributed reporting.