





TAKE-HOME POINTS

By the time you've finished reading this article, you should be able to:

- ✓ Explain how simple substitutions can give your menu the flexibility to accommodate guests who want healthier fare.
- ✓ Compare and contrast when ingredient "transparency" is welcome and when it is necessary.
- ✓ Describe how operators can increase the healthfulness of their menu items and lower food costs, too.

en UP!

What 'Health Eating' Really Means and Where It Fits Into Your Restaurant

By Amelia Levin

Healthier eating is "in." People are thinking about it, doing it, planning to do it, or at least having their kids eat that way. And it's not a trend; it's a movement. Just last year, multiple foodservice research firms in various surveys pointed out that consumers are looking to eat healthier or, at the very least, they're looking for more options whenever it is they choose to do so.

Customization is the key for all consumers, but particularly for college-aged diners, according to Technomic. While not all diners eat healthy or are even turned on by a menu that screams healthy, just under half of those surveyed for the firm's 2011 Healthy Eating Consumer Trend Report (47 percent) want the option to be there, whether it's in the form of a vegetable or salad side versus a starch, veggie add-ons, choice of toppings, or other medium.

Even the National Restaurant Association listed healthier menu items as a top trend for 2012, and healthy options for kids is an even bigger concern these days. The association's Kids LiveWell program has taken off, spurred by the White House's continuing push against obesity nationwide. Just last year more than 15,000 restaurant locations were partners in the program. To be involved, restaurants need to offer younger guests a selection of choices aligned with the 2010 federal dietary guidelines, which include more fruits and vegetables, lean proteins, low-fat dairy, no added sugars and limited sodium, according to Joy Dubost, Ph.D., R.D., nutrition director for the association.



Nutritional Analysis Tools

If you have fewer than 20 units there's no legal need to calculate your menu's nutritional ... yet. That said, it doesn't hurt to be proactive, and stay on top of growing consumer wants. Here's a list of a few tools to get you started on making those calculations.

Esha. A time-tested nutrition analysis software used by dietitians and other food professionals for decades with regular product data updates.

The Culinary Edge. Consulting services include recipe development and testing as well as nutritional analysis of recipes.

www.FoodCalc.com. A popular application for recipe nutritional analysis with touch-screen and higher-tech applications.

www.MenuCalc.com. A Web-based recipe nutrition analysis application with multiple subscriber plans and the ability to store recipes and create prep recipes.

www.NutritionAnalysis.com. A Web-based recipe nutrition analysis application with easy uploads to current guest communication and direct relationships with dietitians and other nutrition professionals.

www.RecipeManager.com. This popular food costing software also comes with a nutritional analysis feature.

Kids' meals in 2012, the association predicts, will continue to focus on nutritionally balanced meals with fruit and vegetable sides as opposed to fries, plus mini-meals, or scaled-down versions of more wholesome adult choices.

Adding to the healthy movement is the launching of the USDA's MyPlate, a new visual model for healthy eating, which in June last year replaced the outdated pyramid once heavy on carbs. MyPlate aims for almost half a dinner plate to be loaded with veggies, with the remaining part of that half being fruit and the other side broken into lean proteins and high-fiber, complex carbohydrates.

It's important to note that today's idea of healthy differs greatly from previous decades'. While the '80s were all about "low fat" and the '90s and early 2000s were all about "low calorie," we've now settled on the notion that it's important to focus more on eating wholesome, fresh and natural foods, less on processed, pesticide-ridden and mass-produced ones, all the while reducing our consumption of added sugars and sodium.

"There is no universal definition for health today," says Aaron Noveshen, founder and president of The Culinary Edge, a restaurant consulting firm. "For the first time in 50 years you can have six people in a room who all eat healthy, but who eat completely differently," he says. For some, that

might be more protein, less starch. For others, it's omitting meat and in some cases, dairy too. Some people just choose to eat less processed, more whole foods.

Healthier eating also spans the generations, from family-focused 40- and 50-year-olds in particular looking to eat healthier, baby boomers looking to lighten up in their prime, and even younger, college-aged diners want a lighter sandwich, salad or other fresh choice from time to time, if not regularly.

With so much variety, restaurants have an easier challenge, and in some ways a greater challenge when it comes to offering healthier options. Bottom line: Simply offering a variety of these choices helps please the most people possible, Noveshen says. "The best thing to do is to ensure someone can eat the way they want to eat in the form of options available that are meaningful. You don't need to scream Weight Watchers or low fat, but simply offer more wholesome foods and be sensible about portions."

Simple Substitutions

Both substituting traditionally heavy dishes and simply adding more healthy options can work. Start small. Create a special menu featuring more vegetable-focused dishes and ones with whole grains and leaner cuts of meat. Add an option for a veggie, turkey burger or lean bison burger that's just as delicious and well-seasoned as a traditional beef burger. Offer toppings of choice. Allow starchier sides to be substituted for salads or simple veggies. Throw in a few tofu or bean-based items.

But diners still like that option of indulging if they want. Chipotle perhaps exemplifies this customization service best, with its flex ordering format and wide range of lighter to heavier combinations. "And they don't say health anywhere," Noveshen says.

Asian Box, a new fast-casual concept in Palo Alto, California, offers diners the opportunity to choose their own "box" with a base choice of Asian salad, brothy noodles, brown rice or white rice bowls, topped with spiced lean proteins, tofu, plenty of vegetables and homemade condiments like sriracha sauce and others without added sugars, sodium and no preservatives. Even still, "indulgence" is an option, from adding spring rolls to dried fruit and lemongrass oil to pickled vegetables.

For high-end independent restaurants like Prairie Grass Café in Chicago, baby steps are important. Chef/co-owner Sarah Stegner came from a fine-dining, heavy French background, but she's lightened up her dishes by adding more vegetables and simplifying dishes. "Our whitefish with portabella mushrooms that we serve with a little shallot, spaghetti squash and Brussels sprouts for crunch is roasted with a little olive oil, touch of salt and pepper," she says. "For a while I used to incorporate butter in a dish like that but realized it didn't need it at all. The butter actually soaks into the fish, which is naturally healthy, and takes the flavor away."

Stegner since Day 1 has been a supporter of grass-fed beef, a naturally leaner item that she packs with taste by roasting, cooking perfectly and coaxing out natural

flavors. She has also introduced a chicken dish with roasted squash, wild rice and pine nuts. “I think whole grains are a really nice component and people really seem to enjoy it.” She also works with seasonal produce, selecting the most colorful, beautiful varieties she can for wholesomeness, freshness and pretty plate presentation. In some cases, spaghetti squash replaces traditional pasta and it’s become a more popular, flavorful and vitamin-packed option.

True Food Kitchen, a four-unit chain with locations in Arizona and California, goes for a more concentrated, healthy approach, based on Dr. Andrew Weil’s anti-inflammatory approach to eating, which focuses on omega-3-rich seafood, fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains and herbs and spices as flavor enhancers over unhealthy fats. Still, the menu doesn’t scream “healthy,” but rather, executive chef Michael Stebner focuses simply on simple, wholesome foods over processed ones, and that has drawn a regular following. “We use healthy fats like extra-virgin olive oil, expeller-pressed canola oil, and we do use butter but in moderation,” Stebner says. “There’s no frying, no packaged food.”

Many chefs have started using leaner cuts of beef, such as skirt steak or loins or eye of round steaks, shoulder and roasts, Dubost says. These are healthier options, and with some being tougher, tend to also be on the less expensive side. Still, they’re just as tasty when braised, slow-roasted, grilled or even smoked until tender. Simply switching from high-fat to low-fat dairy is another easy step, Dubost says. Also, vary your grains — “some of the different whole grains like quinoa, amaranth and others are packed with protein, higher in fiber and taste delicious.”

Other ideas for healthy substitutions include swapping celery root puree for starchy mashed potatoes and scaling back on the cream and butter; making dressings from scratch and offering more oil-based options; offering cauliflower instead of rice in curries, edamame for a crunchy side or sweet potato fries as an alternative to regular.

Beverages play a role in healthier menus, too. At Prairie Grass Café, Stegner offers homemade “sodas” with seltzer water mixed with fresh juices. For kids, she skips the chocolate milks and goes for plain. And at True Food Kitchen, smoothies and juices are an integral part of the menu, from freshly juiced vegetables, fruits and combinations of both. Even cocktails come with fresh-squeezed juice, not sugary syrups and mix-ins. And homemade ginger ale is a popular choice here.

Whether it’s simple substitutions or more overarching healthier menus, however, choosing your route has to match your brand, Noveshen says. “Think about what the nutritional value of your food means in relation to your brand. If you’re a completely indulgent brand with all pizza and ice cream and everything is over 1,000 calories, you’ll have to offer changes in much smaller sound bites.”

Transparency and Labeling

The healthy menu “movement” has more directly affected restaurants in the form of menu labeling legislation requiring restaurants with 20-plus units to disclose nutritional information on

printed menus, menu boards and other visible material; but even if you don’t fall into this legislated category, many restaurants are still proactively being more “transparent” with their customers, who apparently want to see that. According to Mintel, 61 percent of consumers agree that restaurants should post nutritional information like calories and fat grams on their menus regardless of menu labeling legislation.

Disclosing nutritional information in some ways means you have nothing to hide. “There’s a trend beyond just health now and that’s one of transparency,” Noveshen says. “Whether you put it on the menu or not, I think there’s a responsibility of every restaurant to know and understand what they’re serving.

Restaurants that change their menus frequently, however, may be unable to physically or financially calculate nutritional values of each dish all the time. And in another argument, consumers may not be as worried about actual calories, fat and other values as they are about just consuming more vegetables, smaller portions and wholesome foods. At the same rate, you should be prepared if asked. “Some restaurants don’t know what they’re serving — they should know this if they want to provide good

customer service to customers who ask,” Noveshen says. “To withhold that information is not good for any brand.”

When it comes to gluten and allergy designations, complete transparency is not just important; it’s an issue of public health. Other labels and language are important. Words like “fresh,” “local,” “farm” and “all-natural” may have been twisted and contorted on supermarket labels, but there is less room for that at the restaurant. Instead, actual callouts of farms makes things seem more real. And if you call something fresh, it better be so.

Years ago, many restaurants used icons to designate menu items as healthy, including little symbols like asterisks, hearts, even icons of chili peppers to designate spicier items. Today, though, it’s a little outdated.

“Show, don’t tell,” Noveshen says when it comes to being transparent without being overtly so.

These are precisely the two foods now under fire with the healthy menu movement.

Taste is a continuing challenge as restaurants attempt to lighten up their menus, and lighten up the fats, oils, salt, sugar and starch. According to Mintel, 62 percent of consumers say they plan to eat healthier this year, but many complain that healthier food doesn’t taste as good without the added sugar, sodium and fat. Restaurants might address this problem, Mintel says, by swapping in “healthier” ingredients to their patron’s favorite dishes and positioning them as “better for you.”

Butters are still used, to be sure, but olive oil has become a healthier choice. And with some cutting back on sodium, chefs need to look at other ways to build taste and flavor back in their dishes. That means focusing on creating balance between sweet, salt, savory, acid/citrus, even bitter.

Not everyone wants to eat healthy or does, especially when eating out.

For many diners, restaurants are a place to indulge
when they’ve eaten sensibly at home most of the time.

Stebner would agree. “We never use the word healthy, ever,” he says, though True Food Kitchen is very much that way. “We focus on seasonality and freshness and keep recipes simple and pure.”

Up the Veggies, Downgrade the Proteins

Portion control, particularly in proteins, is one way to make menus healthier while possibly saving a few dollars too.

“The easiest way to lighten a menu is to focus on produce, bulking up on vegetables and backing down on dairy, carbohydrates, even proteins,” Stebner says. “It’s about making produce the center of the plate.”

Swapping heavy meats for more beans and protein-rich grains can help balance a dish as well. Rising food costs have caused us to back away from the huge steak dinners. At the same time, people are cutting back anyway.

Stegner has looked to make plates more beautiful by choosing a variety of colorful produce to fill a blank canvas. And more chefs are creating dishes around beautiful local produce rather than just the protein.

Focusing on vegetables also helps build more vegetarian options. At True Food Kitchen, tofu replaces eggs in a scramble, if so desired. Soy chorizo makes for a tasty vegan burrito and quinoa pancakes add protein without the bacon. Steaks are still a big part of the menu, but they’re reasonably portioned at 5.5 ounces and served with plenty of wholesome side choices.

Desserts are getting smaller too; richer, but smaller. A few bites of something delicious are often just what people want.

Improving Taste

Classic culinary instruction focuses on main ingredients for flavor building: fat, often in the form of butter, and salt.

Adding fresh lemon juice brightens up any salad. Heat, in the form of chili peppers, salsas and spices, adds flavor without fat. Roasting, slow cooking, braising, smoking and sous-vide cooking help infuse or coax flavors out of foods without heavy sautéing in oil.

Simply removing all trans fats from menus and swapping saturated fat for healthier oils, denoting items as free of high fructose corn syrup and pesticides, or trying to reduce sodium in some dishes can help create a generally healthier menu without skimping on flavor.

Stebner looks to incorporating more ethnic flavors and spices in his dishes to add taste without the calories. These ethnic-inspired dishes have also become the most popular items, such as the edamame dumplings in a savory broth, brown rice bowls with chicken, vegetables and teriyaki, and Indian or Southeast Asian dishes with curry spices and coconut milk. Hummus is also extremely popular as an alternative to creamy, rich dips.

Not everyone wants to eat healthy or does, especially when eating out. For many diners, restaurants are a place to indulge when they’ve eaten sensibly at home most of the time. But for others, like business travelers, those who dine out for convenience, or others with special-needs diets, whether a restaurant has healthy options available can make or break their decision to eat there. Sometimes regularly indulgent diners just want to lighten it up. That said, offering a range of wholesome choices offers the best chance of attracting not only more diners but diners from different demographics. Variety also helps those diners come back.

Health is at the forefront of restaurant trends, sure. But customization, option, value and variety are the key drivers of menus to come. To be successful in this movement, figure out who you are, who your diners are, where you fit in this equation, and what changes work for you. **RS&G**