



Healthy Options Grow as Patrons Weigh Choices.

A flurry of industry conferences and media attention this year has reaffirmed the commitment of the nation's foodservice operators to addressing the balance between health and nutrition. Despite the bankruptcy of Atkins Nutritionals (promoters of the Atkins Diet), the health trend has not slowed down. Operators are still seeking to improve the healthiness of their menus while maintaining the critical flavor component.

"Consumers do want to eat healthily, but they are not willing to sacrifice satisfaction," says Mark Erickson of the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone. "We have to balance healthy meals and healthy business."

That sentiment is echoed by Catherine Ogilvie, director of marketing and communications for the Almond Board of California. "The foodservice industry is under a lot of pressure to offer healthier options to its customers and still deliver the flavorful, satisfying food they've come to expect," says Ogilvie. "The operators know that health without flavor is not a sustainable proposition and are actively looking for solutions."

The 2005 Worlds of Healthy Flavors conference highlighted "25 Ways to a Healthier Menu" (web link). At the top of the list was replacing the source of trans fats and hydrogenated oils by changing line oil and fryer oil specifications. Other recommendations included specifying naturally lean cuts of meat with close trim, adding more vegetables to entrees, offering more fruit-based desserts and shifting from rich sauces to salsas, chutneys and vinaigrettes.



Niche operators boost their healthy offerings

The trend toward healthy nutrition is especially pronounced among Asian, Mexican and other cuisine-focused chains. Many of these operators are proudly using fresh, non-fried foods and ingredients in their menu applications. They're also promoting usage of more authentic herbs and spices in their ethnic cuisines to increase flavor without decreasing health appeal.

Even the names of some chains tout their affinity to nutrition and freshness – Taco Fresco, Chin's Asia Fresh, O'Naturals and Real Food Daily. Taco Fresco promises that nothing at their operation is fried, and also lets diners ask for low-fat alternative ingredients. The Barberitos chain offers "Skinny" options as a healthy alternative. La Salsa restaurants boast that they have no freezers, microwaves, lard or can openers on the premises.

The Asian cuisine segment is particularly interested in the healthy aspects of its offerings. The menu at Samurai Sam's Teriyaki Grill (based in Scottsdale, Arizona) provides data for each dish on its protein, fat and caloric content. Chin's Asia Fresh (Bloomington, Minnesota) tries to balance fresh ingredients and authentic flavors with an awareness of Western tastes.

Healthier versions of traditional favorites

Not even burgers are immune to the drive for healthier menus. For example, in Nashville, Cheeseburger Charley's offers burger variations such as turkey, "beefalo", salmon and mixed veggie burgers along with its traditional beef burgers.

Health-conscious patrons can enjoy the "Leanest Burgers in America" at Topz (based in Encino, Calif.), with menu items such as lean burgers on whole-wheat buns, turkey burgers, low-fat hot dogs and air-baked fries. Down South, bison meat is prominent on the menu at Ted's Montana Grill, based in Atlanta, which bills it as healthier than beef. The Mediterranean-influenced Pasta Pomodoro, in which Wendy's International has a stake, offers several selections prepared without oil, butter or cheese.

Institutional operators are getting involved as well. Don Clawson is vice president of food and beverages at Classic Residences by Hyatt. Most of the residents at their 93 venues are in independent living and dine in their gourmet dining facilities. "In many cases we have been able to take popular and traditional comfort foods, rework them to make them healthier and weave them into the menu." He intends to continue these improvements. "We're already there on changing fats, adding whole grains, being aware of the glycemic index and reducing our use of refined sugar.... This spring we'll move on to our baking and pastry process."

Educating patrons about nutrition

Operators want to inform patrons about the nutritional content of their food, but often find it takes considerable time and effort. Fresh City restaurants, based in Needham, Mass., had a fresh answer. "We took the pressure off our people and put a nutritional kiosk in our restaurants," says COO Bruce Reinstein. "It makes it much easier. People go up, figure it out and we are much faster at what we do."

The national chains have had similar ideas. Subway has posted nutritional information on napkins since the mid-1990's. Burger King and Wendy's offer the data in brochures and on their websites. McDonald's began posting nutritional information on trayliners in early 2004.

A Matter of Wording

But many operators feel that describing healthy food is at least as difficult as creating it in the first place. "If you introduce something as low fat or low carb or so on, that means something very different from consumer to consumer," said Bruce Reinstein of Fresh Concepts.

Paul Huckleberry of Travelcenters agreed, saying that he is working on a new menu which will "basically tel customers that these items have

lower than X grams of fat or X grams of carbohydrate rather than making claims like 'part of Atkins' or 'heart healthy or any of those kinds of things."

This approach was echoed by Kim Miller of Pollo Tropical. "We produce a nutrition guide," she explained, "but we don't label (the nutritional elements) heart healthy, low carb, low anything. We just let the facts speak for themselves."

While endorsing the importance of the obesity problem, these operators are reluctant to go too far. "Do we become educators?" asked Howard Gordon of The Cheesecake Factory. "It's hard enough being restaurateurs."

An ongoing commitment

Nevertheless, many foodservice operators are integrating these health-oriented trends into their long-term menu planning. A prime example is Stephen Kalil, manager of culinary innovation for Chili's Grill and Bar. "We've moved to trans-fat-free shortening," he says, "and we are fortifying our current menu categories that focus on health and wellness. We're offering good portion sizes with great flavor and looking at using more whole grains." Chili's Grill and Bar is part of Brinker International, whose Brinker Nutrition Council meets every two months for two days to address nutrition and wellness issues.

Adding it all up

With so many mega-trends and anecdotal experiments underway at the same time, it's sometimes hard for operators to see the big picture with flavor and nutrition. "Flavor & The Menu" recently summed up their outlook this way: "Integrating culinary art, food science, operational logistics and marketing provides a full vision for how to create change." Certainly the quest for the balance between flavor and nutrition will be an ongoing one, with both winners and losers discovering through trial and error what works with today's ever more discriminating patrons.

This article is based on recent insights from Flavor & The Menu, Nation's Restaurant News and the Institute of Food Technologists.