

Be creative while looking for healthy options

To spice up this "Eat Cheap" installment, the reporters picked the restaurants and I chose the healthiest under-\$7 meals for them to order. I know this change was giving Matt Christensen and Steve Crump some concern, because I received e-mails such as, "Please, no hummus," or, "I am going to have to eat kale, aren't I?"

I wish more restaurants offered hummus, a Middle Eastern dish made from chickpeas, and kale. But they don't, so Matt and Steve lucked out.

When dining out, I always ask the server about the ingredients and preparation of a dish. I also scan the menu to see whether there are vegetables or rice dishes offered in other meals that I could substitute or add to my meal. With food allergies on the rise, restaurants are very accommodating. Every meal is a new opportunity to make a healthier choice.

I hope these suggestions will help you next time you dine out, too.

Roasted vegetable pasta saute

Steve chose Kelly's on Main Avenue in historic downtown Twin Falls.

I want Steve to have a healthy yet filling meal -- otherwise, I will never hear the end of it -- so I recommend the roasted vegetable pasta saute with a few modifications. It comes with a spicy cream sauce, but if Steve asks, they will make it with an olive oil sauce for a healthier version. Another way to cut the saturated fat in this meal is to omit the Parmesan garnish.

This meal comes with salad and grilled bread. Steve should request the house vinaigrette dressing on the side and with self-restraint use only 1/4 to 1/2 of the container of dressing. Since pasta is a refined carbohydrate, Steve does not need to add more to this meal, so he should refuse the grilled bread. I hope this won't be too painful for him.

I recommend water with no ice, because a cold drink makes your body cold, and it is important to keep your internal body temperature up this time of year. I discourage drinking with a meal, because it tends to help you wash down your food instead of chewing it well.

I hope Steve enjoys his lunch and his body does not go into shock because it was fed vegetables.

Enchiladas and green salad

I now know why Matt chose Happy Burrito in the Turf Plaza. The servings are enormous! Since I have never eaten there, I had to ask a lot of questions about the menu items. I discovered that, unlike most Mexican restaurants, it makes the refried beans without lard and the Spanish rice without chicken broth. It surprised me to find that the only menu item with lard is the flour tortilla, so I focused on a meal that contains only corn tortillas.

After seeing the portion sizes, I thought it would be best for Matt to order a la carte instead of the combo or lunch specials. Matt should order two enchiladas -- which are corn tortillas filled with your choice of meat, smothered in a savory red sauce. Instead of ordering his with meat, I suggest rice, whole beans and pico de gallo (tomatoes, onion and cilantro) for flavor and added vegetables. Beans are a great source of protein and fiber and contain no saturated fat. If you do not make beans at home, order them from time to time instead of meat, chicken or pork when dining out.

Matt should refuse any cheese or sour cream garnish on his enchiladas, which will also reduce the saturated fat in this meal.

For some freshness, I want him to order the green salad, without the cheese or the bread (he already has rice and corn tortillas). Matt is in luck because the only salad dressing offered is ranch. I want him to order it on the side and use a minimum amount on his salad.

I hope Matt will eat his lunch without drinking and washing it down. If he needs something to drink, I suggest water without ice. And don't forget to chew really well.

And, Matt, don't be tempted by the sopapillas at the cash register. Just pay the bill and keep on walkin'.

Kah Tiem with rice and salad

Matt also chose Prasai's Thai Cuisine on Second Avenue East. It is easier to make healthier choices at a Thai restaurant, and Prasai's is no exception.

Since Matt frequents this restaurant, I thought I would expand his tastes a bit. He hoped I would pick the drunken noodle dish, which would have been a good choice, but I selected L21 -- Kah Tiem, steamed rice and Thai salad -- with a few modifications.

Kah Tiem is either beef, chicken or pork sauteed in garlic and served on a bed of steamed cabbage, broccoli and carrots. I want Matt to substitute tofu for the beef, chicken or pork. Tofu is soybean curd and when cooked adapts the flavor of the spices and food with which it is cooked. It is a good source of protein, calcium and iron. Being plant-based, tofu is cholesterol free and does not contribute to heart disease.

I want Matt to ask for no boiled eggs on the Thai salad and to have the peanut dressing served on the side. Peanut dressing normally contains sugar, so, Matt, use it sparingly.

I am guessing Matt does not eat too many steamed vegetables, so I thought it would be a good change for him. Steaming brings out the fiber in vegetables, which is one of the reasons I chose this dish. We can all use more fiber in our diets.

I wish Prasai's offered brown rice, but since it does not, white rice will have to do. Prasai's menu states it does not use MSG, so that is one question Matt will not have to ask his server.

Bagel sandwich with soup

Virginia Hutchins chose Molly's Bagel Bakery on the corner of Blue Lakes Boulevard and Pole Line Road.

Whenever I order a baked flour product, I always order the whole-wheat or whole-grain version to get the most fiber and nutrients possible. Virginia always seems to be up for a challenge, so I thought I would have her order a whole-wheat bagel sandwich with smoked salmon topped with plenty of veggies to lighten it up. Salmon is a great source of omega-3s and is low in saturated fat. If you do not eat salmon at home, ordering it in a restaurant is one way to incorporate it into your diet.

Molly's has an array of fresh vegetables to put on the sandwich, so this is where I like to add as many as possible. Molly's offers white and red onion, tomato, lettuce, cucumbers, sprouts, black olives and even capers for the smoked salmon. Virginia, you do not have to order the capers because they are salty and can leave you craving liquid and sweets -- unless you like them. I would recommend mustard as a condiment on this sandwich because it is lower in saturated fats, and the vinegar in the mustard will help your body digest the oil in the salmon.

Molly's always offers at least two soups a day. Since I am not sure what soup will be offered on the day Virginia eats there, I recommend this: If a broth-based soup is offered that day, order the soup-and-sandwich special. Otherwise, order the sandwich with a green salad with either Italian dressing or oil and vinegar, and use it sparingly.

Soup and salad

Virginia thought it would be a challenge to order something healthy from the restaurant at the Twin Falls airport, Happy Landings Restaurant & Bar, and she was right.

It offers many grilled sandwiches, several types of hamburgers and club and French dip sandwiches, not to mention tuna and chicken salad. I am sure these are all very tasty and satisfying, but not the healthiest of choices. Steve would be in heaven here; however, I had to be a bit creative to find the healthiest option for this lunch.

Happy Landings offers a different homemade soup every day. Again, not knowing which day Virginia will eat here, I recommend the following: If the soup is broth based, order a bowl of soup and a fresh green salad without the cheese. If the soup is cream based, order a cup of soup and half of the Veggie Salad, which is one of the entree salads.

Having beef or chicken in soup is a great way to control the portion size. It tends to be more of an accent to the meal rather than the main course and will not slow you down.

Requesting a whole-wheat or whole-grain roll would complete the meal nicely, if they have one. Again, I suggest either the Italian or vinaigrette dressing on the side and used sparingly. Virginia, I hope you enjoy your lunch and feel satisfied.

You can order in a healthy way anywhere you go, if you take a few minutes to think about what is available. Don't forget to be creative!

I hope Steve and Matt open their minds and their stomachs to better food and will make healthier choices in the next Eat Cheap installment. Stay tuned!

Jill Sherman Skeem is a certified macrobiotic health counselor and graduated from the Strengthening Health Institute in Philadelphia. She teaches health and cooking classes and has a private counseling practice. Skeem can be reached at jillasherman@yahoo.com and 320-2786.

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