

Eat Cheap- Dining Al Fresco – June 24, 2009

There is nothing I enjoy more than alfresco dining. In the summer, we often eat on our deck, have a picnic or dine at a restaurant solely for its patio. It is so much more enjoyable for me than eating in an air-conditioned dining room.

Lately, the weather has made it difficult to eat outdoors. Even the *Times-News* reporters had a tough time doing this story. Let's see whose meal was the healthiest.

Portobello Veggie Panino

Melissa Davlin, oh the restraint it must have taken for you not to have the praline ice-cream for your lunch. Your mother would be proud!

The portobello veggie panino sounded like a wonderful choice. Choosing the dark wheat bread was a good one, too. When you have a bread option, always go with the one that has the most fiber. Keep in mind: Some wheat breads look dark because they contain molasses, so when grocery shopping, read the ingredient list.

Portobellos are large cremini mushrooms. They have such a meaty texture, they are known as vegetarian meat. Many people say they taste like it, too. Honest! I like all the veggies in this sandwich. If you were thinking about reducing the saturated fat in this meal by omitting the cheese, it would have been difficult as the cheese is needed to hold all the ingredients together. I would have preferred the panino to be grilled in a heart-healthy oil such as olive oil instead of butter. Perhaps Upper Crust would consider that option if requested.

Melissa, choosing salad as a side dish was the healthiest of the options. The water content and freshness of the iceberg lettuce helped balance the heaviness of this grilled sandwich. Your mother's tip about dipping your fork into the salad dressing is a great way to get the taste of the dressing while limiting the amount consumed. Other than ordering a vinaigrette dressing – this is a good way to limit saturated fat.

I was happy to find out that Upper Crust's peanut butter cookies are homemade. If you are going to indulge, make it the real thing. Store-bought cookies contain chemicals and preservatives to keep their shelf life.

Chile Verde

Andrew Weeks, congratulations for getting out of your comfort zone and eating on La Fiesta's patio in the rain. For me, as long as it is warm and I am covered, I don't mind eating outside even if it is raining.

La Fiesta makes delicious rice. However, if you are a vegetarian, you should not the Spanish rice does contain chicken broth. The restaurant offers a vegetarian version: steamed white jasmine rice with corn and peas.

Andrew, because pork is a lean meat, this was a good protein choice for your lunch. It appeared to be a large portion, so hopefully you took some home for another meal. Ordering the pork with chile verde sauce provided you with at least a few veggies in addition to the shredded lettuce.

I know the refried beans are yummy, but La Fiesta makes its the traditional way - with lard. It does offer rancho beans which are vegetarian. Substituting the rancho for the refried would have been a healthier choice and a way to reduce the meal's saturated fat and cholesterol.

Andrew, having your meal arrive quickly at a Mexican restaurant is a good thing. It prevents you from eating the entire basket of chips before your meal is served. Have a chip strategy prior to entering any Mexican restaurant. Do one of three things: refuse the chips altogether; tell the wait staff to bring them with the meal; or have the willpower of Zeus and eat only an allotted amount. This will keep you from filling up on the chips and then overeating with your meal.

Spicy Kraut Dog

Ariel Hansen, nothing says summer like a hot dog! And there is no better hot dog than a Hebrew National Kosher all-beef dog. Hebrew National is known for not using any artificial colors, preservatives, fillers or by-products and using only meat from the front half or forequarter of the cow. So, if you are going to eat a hot dog, let it be this one. The only problem with hot dogs is they have high sodium content, which will leave you thirsty for the rest of the day or craving sweets.

Eating just the hot dog didn't seem like it was enough for lunch. Since CK's Dogs offers a tabouli salad - bulgur wheat, tomatoes, onions, parsley, mint,

lemon juice and olive oil - it would have added some grain and something refreshing to balance the salt and heat of the hot dog.

Sauerkraut is a great topping for hot dogs, because not only does it taste good, but it helps the body digest the fat.

Ariel, ordering the “Not” dog, which is pita bread filled with hummus, cucumbers, tomatoes, onions, sprouts and yogurt driz would have been the healthiest choice on CK’s menu, but certainly not the most yummy. Choosing the smaller, kosher hot dog was the better choice over the larger organic bratwurst because it doesn’t contain as much saturated fat and cholesterol.

Fish Tacos

Virginia Hutchins, the fish tacos are my favorite meal at Pandora’s. I order them so often the wait staff practically puts my order in when I walk in the door.

Fish tacos originated in Baja California in Mexico and are traditionally made with fish filets, cabbage slaw, pico de gallo and a zesty tasting sauce. Pandora’s offers fish tacos made with mahi-mahi, which is a very meaty white fish. To reduce what little saturated fat there is in this meal, the yogurt sour cream sauce can be omitted without sacrificing taste. Topping the tacos with Pandora’s homemade spicy salsa is a great substitute and gives the tacos a spicy kick.

Virginia, choosing the house salad over Pandora’s delicious homemade fries I’m sure was a tough one, but a healthier choice and a great way to keep this meal light and refreshing.

It is harder and harder to find homemade items in a restaurant. But most everything on Pandora’s menu is homemade, from the fries to the butternut squash ravioli to the salad dressings and the desserts.

In the heat of the summer, this is the perfect lunch. It has plenty of veggies and the right amount of fish, which is why I am choosing this lunch as the healthiest of the bunch.