

Eat Cheap

Grocery deli counters

By Times-News

Lunches at grocery stores' deli counters offer certain advantages: speedy service, no tipping, no surprises. What you see is what you get. Of course, nobody refills your drink, there might not be anywhere handy to sit and, if there is, you can't be entirely certain that your table has been wiped since the last customer cleared away his wrappers.

But Magic Valley's deli counters have made strides recently, so we set out to see what the lunch experience is like these days. The budget: \$7. As usual, we asked Jill Sherman Skeem, a local health counselor, to evaluate our choices too.

Next time, we'll return to the restaurant circuit.

For future installments of "Eat Cheap," you can nominate your favorite restaurant lunches anywhere in Magic Valley, priced at under \$7, not including tax or tip. E-mail your suggestions to virginia.hutchins@lee.net with "Eat Cheap" in the subject line.

Deli sandwich Price: \$5.99

By Matt Christensen

You'll find one of the cheapest lunches in Wood River Valley at the Atkinsons' Market deli counter. When I stopped by for lunch in Hailey last month, there was a long line of laborers, mothers and business people waiting for hot soup, corn dogs, chicken strips and the like.

Atkinsons' also has a respectable salad bar and, of course, all the deli meats and salads you'd expect from a grocery deli counter. The high-end sliceable meats are fairly expensive (sold by the pound), but a reasonable way to sample them is in a sandwich.

The counter will build one for you with your choice of almost any meat in the case. Several bread choices are available. Same with cheese. For \$5.99, they also throw in a bag of chips and a fountain drink.

The sandwich deal sounded good to me: I could get fresh ingredients that, unlike the corn dogs, hadn't been sitting under a heat lamp all day.

I chose turkey and cheddar on white bread with onions, lettuce and tomatoes. I skipped the mayo and asked for Dijon mustard instead. Wise choice. The tangy mustard complemented the smoky turkey better than I could have imagined. The extra-thick chips weren't bad, either.

Another bonus: Atkinsons' has seating for deli customers. Unfortunately, the tables are near the entrance, so every time a customer came into the store, I was hit by a cold blast of air. Next time, I'll get coffee and wear my mittens.

— Matt Christensen

Fried chicken and coleslaw Price: \$4.47

By Matt Christensen

Say WinCo Foods and most folks probably picture jumbo-size toilet paper packages and 80-pound bags of dog food.

From now on, I'll think of fried chicken.

I wandered into the Twin Falls discount grocery store last month with an empty stomach and an even emptier wallet.

My heart sank and my stomach growled when I discovered the deli counter doesn't sell individual-size lunches.

Lucky for me, the women behind the counter were happy (and patient enough) to help me build one anyway. WinCo sells individual pieces of chicken, but if you buy in quantities of four (\$3.98), you'll save money, I was told.

I added a half-pound of coleslaw for 49 cents.

With no place to sit, I drove back to my house and fixed a plate. By then, the chicken had cooled considerably. I know because I tasted a leg in the car. But it was still pretty good. (I'm a believer that fried chicken is sometimes better cold). Lots of pepper, not oily at all, with just enough breading to seal in the juices.

The slaw was even better — large chunks of cabbage and carrots. I usually avoid coleslaw because most folks overdo it with the dressing. WinCo gets it right: only enough to wet the veggies. I ate the whole half-pound.

When it came to the chicken, I could handle only the breast and half of a wing. However, it worked out great because I had a midnight snack for later.

Chili and garden salad Price: \$6.48

By Steve Crump

The whole idea of the supermarket deli is fast and fresh: If you want gourmet, you're going to have to invest more than seven bucks and 10 minutes.

Smith's, the Kroger-owned first cousin to Fred Meyer, doesn't disappoint. I stopped by the Twin Falls store at noon-hour on a chilly late-summer day and found exactly what I was looking for: a bowl of chili and a tossed green salad.

The chili (\$3.49) was part of the "gourmet soup" series that's a fixture of Smith's and Fred Meyer delis these days; clam chowder and vegetable beef soup were the other two options on offer. In this case, I'm pretty sure "gourmet" didn't translate into "homemade," but the chili was nicely done — and recently.

Stale chili whipped up from sub-par ingredients is typically overspiced and has a greasy undertaste. But in the Smith's chili, the beans, onions and peppers were firm, the ground beef was savory and the chili powder was present in a pleasingly moderate quantity.

The \$2.99 garden salad (iceberg lettuce, cherry tomatoes, shredded carrots) was pre-packaged — either made on the premises earlier in the day or trucked in from a distribution center. I junked the container of ranch dressing that came with it and substituted a packet of honey Dijon; that made all the difference in the world.

All that's required of tossed green salad, really, is freshness. It made a nice complement to my deli lunch.

Cold sandwich and veggies Price: \$6.98

By Virginia S. Hutchins

The hot foods appeared mostly deep-fried. And the only significant vegetable presence among the salads was cabbage. So my best option at the Ridley's deli counter in Jerome seemed to be a \$3.49 sandwich — one with an extremely generous layer of turkey and the merest hint of tomato, onion and cucumber. Amazingly thin slices.

Adjusting the meat-to-veggie ratio wasn't an option, because sandwiches aren't made to order. (In fact, mine had been packaged the day before, and the top slice of bread was drying out.) So I augmented my meal with a party tub of ready-to-eat carrots, broccoli and cauliflower, knowing I'd eat just a small portion. But, hey, at \$3.49 it kept my lunch within budget.

Ridley's provides no deli seating; I didn't spot any benches outside the adjacent strip mall; and I didn't feel like following the example of the man eating his deli lunch in the parking space next to mine, window down and radio on.

So I crossed the street to a softball park and ate at a graffiti-riddled picnic table, using the grocery sack for a tablecloth.

A littered but otherwise peaceful spot.

It all tasted fine, but there were no surprises in this lunch.

Summer rolls and juice Price: \$6.14

By Virginia S. Hutchins

The plentiful deli choices at Fred Meyer in Twin Falls — various hot fare, sandwiches and vegetable-based salads — had me stumped. But the sushi chef's sales pitch settled the question.

Seeing me eye the lone package of summer rolls in the sushi case, he listed the rolls' contents, assured me "everything cooked," told me the summer rolls are popular with his regulars (see, just one package left of the many he'd prepared that day) and urged me to let him know whether I liked them. I never caught just what he would do if I didn't, but I got the impression that he'd make it up to me.

My four rolls (\$4.85) left me with money for a cold bottle of orange juice (\$1.29). In the nearby bakery, I looked briefly for a whole wheat roll available singly. Finding none, I did without.

The summer rolls were a combination of dark green leaf lettuce, imitation crab, shrimp, avocado and slender-sliced carrot and cucumber, both delightfully crunchy — all wrapped in edible tapioca paper. A delicious discovery. For variety, I dressed up some bites with the sweet chili sauce packaged with the rolls, and some with the packets of soy sauce offered by that pleasant sushi chef.

Unlike most restaurants, deli dining offers ingredient lists — fine reading material for the solo diner. Though neither sauce included preservatives, my carrots did. Beats me why a deli counter a few steps away from a grocery produce department needs preservatives on the carrots.

But that won't keep me from buying summer rolls again. And eating them there. Fred Meyer's newly remodeled dining area has trendy flooring and tables befitting its Starbucks stand. Those touches — and the natural light from large windows — do much to counteract the cavernous ceiling and noisy ducts of a grocery store.

— Virginia S. Hutchins

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When Features Editor Virginia Hutchins told me the next “Eat Cheap” installment would be deli counters, I had my doubts about healthy choices. Of course there are the deep-fried and overdressed macaroni and potato salads, but try to look beyond those options. Choose items lowest in saturated fat and highest in whole grains. Homemade cooking is still the healthiest, but when you are in a pinch look to the deli counters, they aren’t what they used to be.

Fred Meyer

It is exciting that Fred Meyer now offers freshly made sushi. It is always nice to have a variety of food to choose from at a deli counter. I have enjoyed the avocado summer rolls on several occasions myself.

This meal has a nice balance of protein to vegetables but does lack a grain. Virginia, your instincts were correct about looking for a whole-wheat roll to make this lunch a complete meal. I wonder if they would let you purchase a side of the sushi rice.

The only caution I have with this meal is the amount of sweet chili and soy sauces used. Too much can create liquid cravings.

Some people think sushi is only raw fish, but that could not be further from the truth. It can be made with cooked fish or with just vegetables.

Nori (not used in the summer rolls you bought) is the seaweed used to wrap around sushi’s rice and fillings. It rivals carrots in Vitamin A, has twice the protein of some meats and contains many minerals. Nori rolls are great for a lunch, snack or appetizer. So step out of your routine and try something new. I think you will enjoy them.

Even though the summer roll meal lacked a grain, with the fresh vegetables and seafood I choose this as the healthiest lunch of the bunch.

Ridley’s

Virginia, the selections at a deli counter can be heavy on the deep-fried items, so choosing a deli sandwich was a good idea. I agree it was a large amount of turkey compared with the vegetables in this sandwich. Perhaps eating only half of the sandwich and taking the remaining half for another lunch would have been a good idea. You could then add as many vegetables as you want.

Choosing a side dish of vegetables is a good idea. The remainder of the tub could be used for another lunch or sautéed for a side dish at another meal. You didn’t mention whether you dipped them in the ranch dressing that was provided. If a vinaigrette option was available that would have been a better choice.

Eating at the softball park was a great idea. When you take time out to eat lunch, it helps you handle the rest of your hectic day better.

So many people pick up a fast-food meal for themselves or their kids and eat while driving. Next time, stop at a park and make a picnic of it. You will enjoy your meal so much more and feel satisfied with it--- no matter what quality of food you choose.

Winco

Matt Christensen, I really thought Steve Crump would be the one to choose fried chicken! The smell of fried chicken in a grocery store is always yummy. However, when you are hungry and have to write a story, it is also apparently hard to resist. This is not the best choice if you are

concerned about your cholesterol. The flavor is in the crispy skin, but so is the saturated fat. Peeling off the skin would help this meal, but I am sure it was not an option you liked. In addition, many stores and restaurants still deep-fry in oil containing trans fatty acids.

I am glad the coleslaw was light on the dressing, especially since you ate the whole container. I am sure it helped balance out the hot, peppery chicken.

Matt, I am impressed you took your lunch home to eat at a table instead of in your car. It is important to sit down to eat meals and snacks without doing other things. It helps our body digest and receive the most nutrients from the food we eat.

I am SO glad the nice WinCo women helped you buy more of the chicken so you could have a midnight snack. Not! It is important not to eat for at least three hours before you go to bed. That will help your body repair and maintain itself better, and you will have an easier time waking up. Matt, I hope you didn't have a fried chicken hangover the next day.

Atkinson's

Matt, after your last lunch I am happy you decided to choose a sandwich with fresh ingredients! But WHITE BREAD?!!! Since there were several bread choices, choosing one with whole grains would have been a better choice. Most Americans do not get enough fiber in their diet, so whenever possible choose whole-wheat or whole-grain bread or wraps. When buying bread in a grocery store, be sure the first ingredient listed is whole-wheat or whole-grain flour and that there are as few ingredients as possible. Often, bread's dark color is due to molasses or caramel coloring.

Skipping the mayo is one way to help cut the fat in any meal. I am proud that you substituted mustard.

Potato chips are always yummy but are salty, which can cause you to crave liquid or sweets. But keep in mind: There are 10 teaspoons of sugar in a 12- ounce soda.

Matt, I am glad you looked corn dogs and chicken strips in the face and chose a sandwich instead. Now that's progress!

Smith's

Steve, nothing is better on a chilly day than chili. Fall is here, so this is the time to start eating foods that warm the body. Stews, soups, root vegetables, short-grain brown rice and beans are good choices. Using more oil and longer cooking times also helps our bodies adjust to colder weather.

I am surprised a green salad sounded good to you. Raw salad should be benched now because it cools the body. I am proud of you for junking the ranch dressing in favor of the honey Dijon. Have you been reading my columns??

This meal did lack a grain, so a rice dish or whole-wheat roll would have completed it nicely.

I am just impressed you didn't buy the fried chicken!

Jill Sherman Skeem is a certified macrobiotic health counselor and graduated from the Strengthening Health Institute in Philadelphia. She has studied food -- and the effects it has on the body -- for close to six years. She teaches health and cooking classes and has a private counseling practice. Sherman can be reached at jillasherman@yahoo.com and 320-2786.