

Restaurant nutrition. Mongolian barbecue claims top spot for nutrition for 'Eat cheap.'

By Jill Sherman Skeem

American consumers spend almost 47 percent of their food dollars in the restaurant community, according to the National Restaurant Association. But if you are concerned about your health, dining out can be challenging.

However, there are things you can do to improve a menu item, and most restaurants are very accommodating. Remember: Every meal is a new opportunity to make better choices.

These suggestions regarding *Times-News* reporters' featured lunches should give you ideas on how to make a meal healthier:

Cheeseburger with ham

Matt Christensen, I am so happy that you waved your napkin and gave up on the lumberjack; otherwise, *The Times-News* might be looking for a new reporter. No one should eat this amount of saturated fat at one meal, or even three.

The best parts of this sandwich were the lettuce, tomatoes, onions, pickles and bun -- at least it was a grain product. As far as the salad goes, I think a vinaigrette dressing or even oil and vinegar would have been a better choice than the ranch dressing. Ordering the dressing on the side is a great way to prevent the salad from drowning in dressing.

Matt, I think you are wise to leave the Lumberjack to the lumberjacks.

Mongolian barbecue

Virginia Hutchins, your mom was right: Vegetable consumption is key at every meal, even breakfast.

It was wise to have the beef and chicken as more of an accent to the meal rather than the main course. The noodles were a great choice as a grain product and can be very relaxing.

Preparation is also important when considering a meal. A vegetable saute is very satisfying, and the choice of sesame oil was a good one. We all need oil in our diet, and oil saute is the best way to get that oil. The fact that the veggies were still crunchy is a great sign that they were still nutritious and not overcooked.

The only caution I would have would be the number of sauces you chose for flavor, because they can contain a lot of sodium, which can make you crave sweets.

This lunch wins the best choice from the six lunches that I reviewed.

Cashew chicken sandwich

Virginia, between the cashews, mayonnaise and butter croissant, this sandwich is loaded with fat. One way to improve it would be to substitute whole-grain bread for the croissant.

The side salad looks delicious, and it was smart to order the dressing on the side. Although I know you were glad iceberg lettuce was not among the greens, it does have some redeeming qualities. It is very refreshing in the summer heat because it holds a lot of water and helps with hydration.

French dip sandwich

Steve Crump, do you know how to pick comfort food, or what?

Unfortunately, the healthiest part of this sandwich was the parsley garnish. Which I hope you ate, because it contains more Vitamin C than any other fruit or vegetable.

You mentioned the au jus not being too salty, but since you drank four cups of coffee during this lunch, I have to wonder. By the way, it is better not to drink during your meal because it dilutes the digestive juices and can cause you to wash down your food instead of chewing it well.

If you wanted to make this lunch healthier, you could replace the fries with a side salad or some cooked vegetables.

But if you just want comfort food, this is a winner.

Chicken on rice

Matt, you redeemed yourself with your chicken, vegetables and rice lunch. Even though it is white rice, it is still a grain, and the vegetables look crisp and delicious.

When ordering Chinese food, always inquire about the restaurant's use of MSG so you can decide whether or not you want it in your food.

Ordering a broth-based or pureed vegetable soup is a great starter to a meal because it relaxes your digestive tract and aids in digestion. However, be careful of cream- or cheese-based soups because of the saturated fats.

You mentioned a black bean sauce. Beans are a great source of protein and fiber and make your skin smooth. They are a wonderful alternative to meat, poultry or fish, so switch it up a few meals a week and add beans to your life.

Beef taco and burrito

Steve, you are the king of comfort food!

Mexican food is always delicious and satisfies us on many levels -- the creaminess of the beans, the crunch of the chips and the cool of the salsa. However, it can leave us thirsty and bloated depending on the number of chips we eat, which usually is as many as they bring. (This is where iceberg lettuce comes in handy.)

There can be some hidden fats in the food you need to know about. Some refried beans still contain lard or at the very least pork broth, and Spanish rice often contains chicken broth. So, if you are concerned or are a vegetarian, ask your server before you order.

A way to make Mexican food a bit healthier is to omit the sour cream that garnishes many of the dishes and to decline the chips at least until your meal arrives.

But when we go out for Mexican food, it is because we want something tasty, and, Steve, you picked one of the best places in town for that.

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