

Eat Cheap: Mexican

“Eat Cheap” is back, but with two new players. Melissa Davlin and Ariel Hansen have replaced Matt Christensen and Steve Crump as lunch reviewers. After assessing their lunch choices for this segment, I can already see they are not following in Matt’s and Steve’s footsteps, which might make it more difficult for me to choose the healthiest lunch now.

However, because Mexican food was the theme this time, picking the healthiest meal was not an easy feat anyway.

Mexican food appeals to so many of us because it is creamy, crunchy, salty, hearty and just downright tasty. It can be challenging to make healthy choices at a Mexican restaurant and still feel satisfied with your meal. The modifications I suggest will let you still enjoy this delicious cuisine by reducing the saturated fat, cholesterol and - more importantly- guilt.

Caldo de pollo

Winter is here and nothing warms you better than a nice bowl of soup. Caldo de pollo is the Mexican version of chicken soup. Most Mexicans start their main meal with soup; without it, they don’t consider the meal complete. Eating soup before or with your meal not only helps your digestion, but actually causes you to eat less. It is hard to eat hot soup quickly. So, by slowing you down, it allows your body to know if it is full - thus helping you to avoid overeating.

Virginia Hutchins, since it looks like Garibaldi’s served an entire chicken breast in this soup, it was wise you took the rest home for an additional meal or two. Eating all of the avocado and salsa was a great way to balance the salty broth, which can also leave you craving liquid and sweets.

This soup did lack vegetables, but with the chips and salsa, this lunch had it all: grain, vegetable and protein. Therefore, I am choosing this lunch as the healthiest of the bunch. Not so much for what it had, but for what it didn’t: cheese, sour cream and refried beans made with lard.

Cheese enchilada combo

Melissa, for a Mexican restaurant, La Fiesta has a variety of healthy options on its menu. Unfortunately, the cheese enchilada is not one of them. Ordering a vegetable enchilada would have made this lunch healthier. Whenever there is a veggie option, choose it! The more veggies you can add to a dish, the better.

I am proud of you for passing on the sour cream. With all the cheese in this meal, the last thing you needed was more saturated fat. Substituting guacamole for sour cream would

have been a good option. You get not only the cool, creamy texture, but also heart-healthy mono-unsaturated fat and vitamins. Then the lettuce garnish would not have been the only green item on your plate.

Requesting rancho beans over refried beans is always a better choice because they are not made with lard. La Fiesta does offer jasmine rice in addition to Spanish rice. Even though jasmine is white rice, it does have some veggies in it and, more importantly, no chicken broth. So, if you are a vegetarian, there is still a rice option you can order.

Melissa, chips and salsa are difficult to resist. Even the fly had a hard time. When you are hungry, it is better to either refuse the chips and salsa altogether or request they accompany your meal. Otherwise, you can fill up on them by the time your meal arrives and then overeat.

Grilled chimichanga lunch combo

The best way to avoid over-eating at an all-you-can-eat buffet is to order off the menu. That way, you won't eat to get your money's worth.

Substituting vegetables for meat is not only a great way to reduce the saturated fat and cholesterol in a meal, but also a way to add vegetables to your diet.

Melissa, I see the sour cream made its way back to this lunch. Substituting an additional dollop of guacamole would reduce the saturated fat in this meal. I realize sour cream is one of the top condiments in Idaho, but omitting or substituting a healthier option will really reduce the fat and cholesterol in a meal.

Traditionally, chimichangas are deep-fried burritos so Aztlan's grilled version is a much healthier preparation. Since the chimichanga already contained cheese, omitting the cheese garnish would have lightened this dish.

This looked like a hefty meal. Surrendering after eating less than half was not only a good idea but a matter of survival. I am not so sure Matt or Steve would have done so.

.....

Tamale and taco combo plate

Small portions are usually not a phrase used to describe Mexican dishes. It is nice to know the College of Southern Idaho students won't go hungry with 9 Beans & a Burrito around. Having the quantity match the quality is also a rare combination.

Mexican tamales are a great choice for lunch. They are packets of corn dough with a savory or sweet filling, typically wrapped in either corn husks or banana leaves and steamed. Authentic tamales are served without a sauce, unlike in most American-Mexican restaurants, and vary in different regions in Mexico.

Ariel, substituting chicken is a great way to reduce the saturated fat in any meal. However, a bean option without lard would have been an even better choice. Beans are

not only tasty but a great source of fiber. Since beans are a plant-based protein, they are easier for your body to digest. So, for a healthy change, order beans instead of meat or chicken from time to time.



Tacos al carbon

Tacos al carbons, also known as tacos de carne asada, are popular street fare in Mexico. Traditionally, they are prepared by grilling meat over mesquite coals, slicing it thinly and stuffing it into tortillas. Virginia, ordering them with chicken throws all tradition out the window but makes this dish healthier.

Refried beans are traditionally made with lard, so if there is not a healthier version on the menu such as rancho beans, remember to order them without the cheese garnish. This reduces the fat and cholesterol in this side dish.

Virginia, taking home one of the Mazatlan Grill tacos for a second meal was a great idea. This helps prevent overeating, which is *so* easy to do. Other ways to help prevent overeating when dining out are: 1) Instead of waiting until the end of your meal for a take-out container, request it immediately and portion out half your meal. That way you won't be tempted to nibble at it if others are still eating or you're waiting for the check; and 2) if possible, when eating with a friend order an appetizer and share an entrée.

This will save not only your waistline but your wallet too.