

With summer vacation fast approaching, more people will be traveling and eating at restaurants that might have the largest or healthiest menus. In the “Eat Cheap” series, Matt Christensen, Steve Crump and Virginia Hutchins chose restaurants that everyone can relate to when on vacation or traveling to their destinations. It takes just a few minutes to review a menu and really think about the options available. I am going to give you suggestions so you can eat in a healthy manner no matter where you go. Planning where and what to eat keeps you from making bad choices.

If you know you will be stopping at a certain restaurant and need some guidance, please contact me. I will be happy to help you with your selections.

Nuggets, tot and cheese sticks

Matt, to think I had you eating tofu in the last “Eat Cheap” installment. I know you have been going through a tough time lately, kicking the smoking habit (for which I am very proud of you), but ordering a lunch with three deep-fried dishes is not the way to go!

I realize your choices were limited, but this lunch definitely needed more balance. The first clue? Everything was the same color- beige - and the only way to distinguish one item from the next was by the shape.

You were right when you said you felt you were back in school. Unfortunately, these items are standard fare for the children of this country. However, unless you make chicken nuggets yourself, from one piece of chicken, look for a healthier choice. I realize they are easy to eat, but most chicken nuggets are a composite of chickens, chemicals, fillers and preservatives. In addition, they are deep-fried, and many restaurants still use oil that contains trans fats. Our children deserve better food for their bodies and so do you, Matt.

Looking at your second course, French fries would have been a better choice than tater tots. The less processed a food is, the better, and these tots definitely do not resemble “taters”.

To end this delicious meal with cheese sticks was the trifecta of saturated fat. You mentioned ranch dressing and mayonnaise were provided as dipping sauces, but you never mentioned whether you used them. I hope you did not. Just looking at this lunch makes me want anything green and refreshing.

Since the seasons are changing and we are moving into summer this is the only time to reduce the amount of deep-fried food and oil used. Now is the time to start lightening up our menus so that we can adjust to the heat of the season. Craving more salads and fruit is natural this time of year and helps our bodies cool off.

When we crave fat, it is a sign we need more oil in our diet – good quality oil! The best way to get that and to help with deep-fried cravings is to sauté vegetables in either olive oil or light sesame oil. This will help you feel satisfied.

Pizza sub and chops

Matt, I am proud of you for ordering only half a sub and at least having the instinct to order a salad instead of chips. I agree that it is hard to feel satisfied with just a salad for lunch. If available, a side or pasta, vegetables, an appetizer or even meatballs would have gone well with a salad and been a better choice.

A pizza sub consisting of spicy Italian sausage, pepperoni and cheese and contains a lot of saturated fat. In addition to the processed meats, the chips and olives are loaded with salt, which leave you craving liquid and sweets. Just reading about your lunch made me thirsty.

When a restaurant has a limited menu and you want to make the best choices possible, choose a veggie sub or one that includes vegetables. If one is not on the menu, request they add veggies. When choosing condiments for your sub, always select healthier ones such as mustard or vinaigrette instead of mayonnaise or butter. Other ways to cut down the saturated fat in any meal are to reduce or eliminate the amount of cheese and to substitute a salad or veggies for chips or fries.

Matt, you didn't mention a drink, but I am sure you were drinking all the way back to the office.

Reuben sandwich with fries

Steve, I had no idea the Reuben originated in Nebraska. It was my favorite sandwich growing up – even though it would leave me thirsty and drinking water the rest of the day. It is very satisfying because of the grilled bread, melted cheese, sauerkraut and salty corned beef balanced by the sweetness of the dressing. However, this sandwich is loaded with saturated fat and salt. You failed to mention the side of fries. A green salad or coleslaw would have been a better choice.

Sauerkraut actually helps the body digest fat. Which is a good thing, especially with this sandwich. Substituting turkey instead of corned beef would improve this sandwich a bit. Steve, I hope you ate the green garnish peaking out from under your sandwich. It was the only part of this lunch that looked refreshing.

This sandwich does bring back childhood memories. A good Reuben is always yummy – but not the healthiest of choices.

Turkey-Swiss wrap

Virginia, the lunch you chose was by far the healthiest of all the lunches selected. Even though soup is a great addition to any meal, a cream-based soup is not the healthiest.

Soups made with a cream, milk or cheese base contain the most saturated fat even though they contain vegetables. Ordering a broth-based soup, especially vegetable broth, is much healthier. It was a good thing they were out of the cream of asparagus soup.

This sandwich looks so fresh and refreshing, especially compared with the other lunches. Eliminating the cheese is one more way to make this sandwich even healthier.

Virginia, good job on your choice. Matt and Steve should be taking notice!

Machaca and salad

Virginia, ordering this meal without beef would help lower the amount of saturated fat, but then it would be called a veggie omelet. "Machaca" sounds so much better.

It is always good to review a menu to see what is offered. In this case, having a budget helped you do that.

Requesting fruit or vegetables is a great way to make a dish healthier, and this meal is no exception. The dish looked a bit heavy, so the fresh salad and veggies lightened and balance the salt in this meal. Inquiring about the type of oil used for the scramble and the corn tortillas will give you an idea whether you want to request another dish or the use of a different oil.

It looked delicious and seemed filling.

Way to go, Virginia, for choosing healthier options!