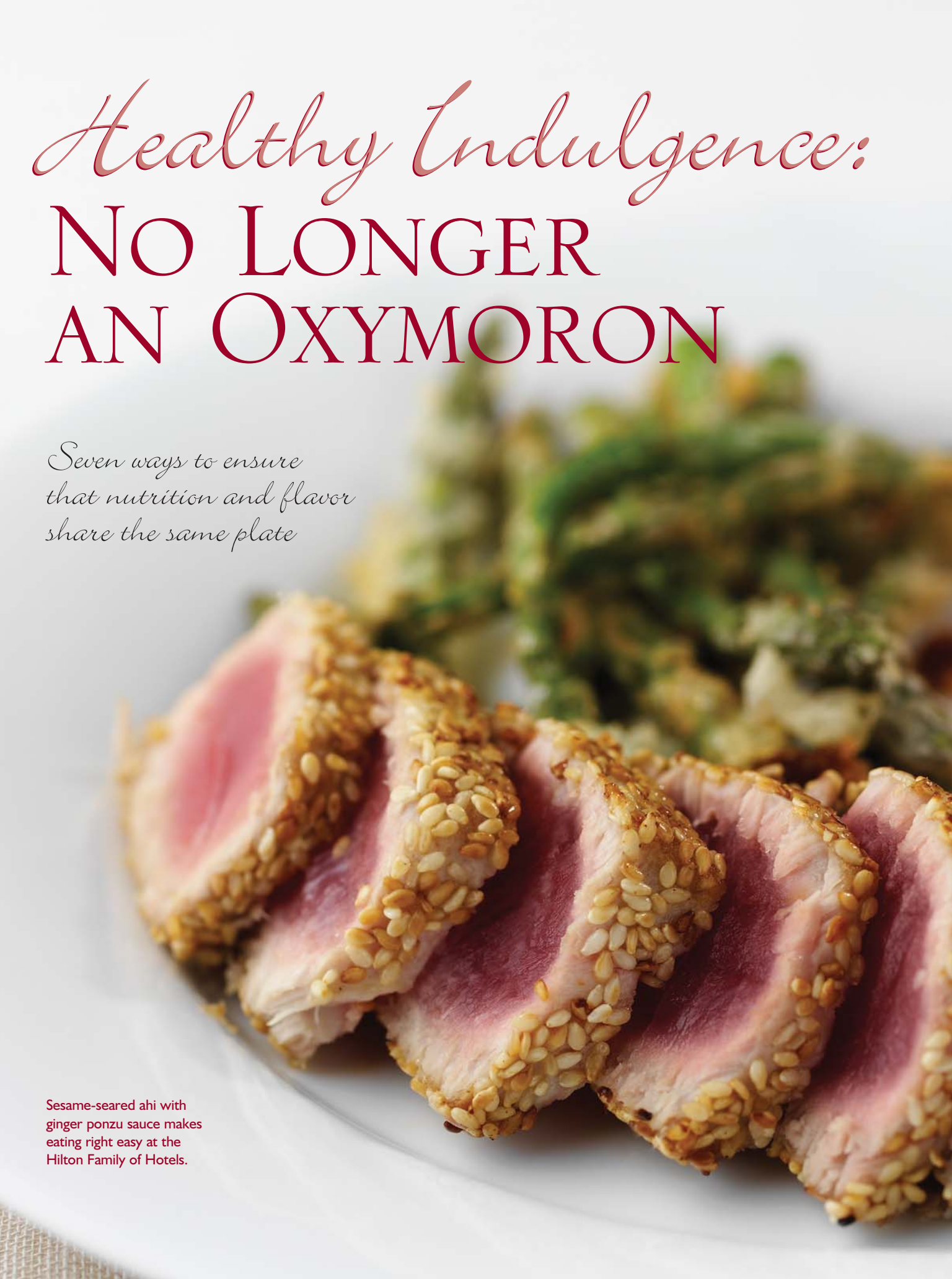


Healthy Indulgence: **NO LONGER AN OXYMORON**

*Seven ways to ensure
that nutrition and flavor
share the same plate*



Sesame-seared ahi with
ginger ponzu sauce makes
eating right easy at the
Hilton Family of Hotels.

- ▶ An equation that explains why your healthful menu may not cut it
- ▶ How to connect customers' desire for better nutrition with their actual eating patterns
- ▶ Seven ways to provide healthful foods that also keep the pleasure quotient high

BY JOANNE LICHTEN, PH.D., R.D.

If you have ever said, “Customers say they want to eat healthy, but when we put healthier options on the menu, they don’t buy them,” you’re not imagining this consumer paradox. Just listen to what two operators related in a recent *Miami Herald* article.

“We have healthy alternatives,” pointed out Hardee’s CEO Andy Puzder, citing an all-white-meat barbecued-chicken sandwich that has 4 grams of fat. “They don’t sell. We sell five times as many Monster burgers as we do barbecued chickens.”

Burger King’s chief concept officer, Denny Post, expressed similar sentiments: “Even the grilled chicken gets outsold by the fried chicken five to one. People vote with their wallets, and [healthy eating] is more of a talked-about trend than a behavior trend.”

TALKING THE TALK, WALKING THE WALK

Why do customers say they want to eat more healthfully but then don’t? There are at least three reasons.

First, there’s a problem with operator perceptions and expectations. While both Hardee’s and Burger King expressed disappointment in selling five times more of the unhealthier product than the healthier one — 83 percent versus 17 percent — those sales figures are not far from the 24 percent of people reporting that they are on a diet, according to NPD Foodworld. Furthermore, that 17 percent is a healthy portion of overall sales and should not be overlooked as an important piece of a business plan that accommodates the varied needs and desires of the foodservice market.

Second, our good-food-bad-food mentality can limit our perspective about what is healthful. According to the American Dietetic Association’s Trends 2000 survey, 77 percent of Americans believe there are “good” foods and “bad” foods. Therefore, we may view a grilled chicken sandwich or a salad as “healthful” and a hamburger or fried chicken sandwich

Eat Right: A CULTURAL SHIFT

One way to succeed in bringing better health to more menus is to shift the focus away from diets and toward comprehensive cultural changes that affect every aspect of the way an operation provides nutritionally sound food and information to its customers.

This approach is the thinking behind a recent initiative by the Hilton Family of Hotels called the Hilton Eat Right, Doubletree Eat Right and Embassy Suites Hotels Eat Right menus. Paul Keeler, the Hilton Family of Hotels' vice president of food and beverage, admits that the low-carb diet trend prompted the organization to begin looking at new menu options. However, working with Johnson & Wales University in an intense five-day training program focused on nutritionally balanced diets and American Dietetic Association guidelines helped him and a team of five corporate chefs expand their view.

"We wanted to come up with menu options that covered a multitude of needs — for diabetics, vegetarians, seniors, children, etc.," explains Keeler. "We also didn't want to approach this as a program with a beginning and an end. We realized coming up with 20 recipes didn't skim the surface. This is a living, evolving, cultural, nutrition initiative."

The initiative provides all Hilton's local operators with a library of 90 recipes that is expected to grow to 200 by the end of the year. Nutritional software breaks down the components of a dish, and Menu Makers software lets operators choose and print their own menus in house.

"We support the menu with beautiful photography and posters for restaurant lobbies and have a web-based delivery system for the whole initiative," Keeler says. "Each selection provides nutritional facts, and if customers want more comprehensive information, our operators have that readily available."

Operators also have the option of creating regional variations or entirely



HILTON HOTELS CORPORATION

new recipes. "If a chef in Arizona wants to do a Southwest theme on an existing recipe or a whole new entrée, as long as he goes through the software and meets the nutritional guidelines, new recipes can be added to the program," he adds.

This initiative is also presented in the form of a supplemental menu that all guests see in addition to regular menus, another choice that was carefully considered before launching.

"You can't just integrate these new items with icons, and we didn't want to simply bury them in our menus. We wanted our customers to see the dedication and the depth of the selections we're providing, and to see we have breakdowns for calories, fat, protein and fiber," explains Keeler.

Plus, presenting these creations together as a whole allows customers to see the highly flavored and varied menu options available to people opting to eat right. Spicy roasted halibut with celeriac puree, alder-planked salmon with béarnaise and sesame-seared tuna with ginger ponzu sauce are just a couple of the menu highlights.

"The reason we brought our most talented chefs to Johnson & Wales was

The Hilton Hotels' Eat Right initiative offers customers a menu of highly flavored options that are also strong on nutrition.

because flavor was a big priority," Keeler explains. "Customers need to know that food that's strong on nutrition hasn't had all the flavor taken out of it. It's not hospital food. The seared ahi, which in some markets has become a best seller among all menus, uses pickled ginger, low-sodium soy and chile paste. These are all highly flavored and nutritious ingredients."

Keeler confesses that the initiative took a lot longer than anyone at his organization expected, and he got a lot of "What's taking so long?" comments along the way. But he stayed the course.

"You can't come up with a program that is all things to all people. This needs to grow and evolve as people's concerns grow and evolve," he points out. "Our goal was to address the nutritionally based concerns of our customers, and we believe we've created a living document that's meaningful to our guests, our chefs and our servers."

— Kathy Hayden



SEASONS 52

Layered flavors that deliver satisfying taste and texture in a healthy format are emphasized in Seasons 52's kitchen.

as "unhealthy." In reality, a hamburger can have fewer calories and be more healthfully prepared than a grilled chicken sandwich covered with cheese and smothered in mayonnaise. And a modest chicken filet fried in plant-based oils and served on a multi-grain bun can be lower in calories than a salad laden with creamy blue-cheese dressing and deli meats.

Since most research doesn't keep track of how the meal is ordered — for example, with or without condiments or dressings — and how much is eaten, we really don't know how many of our customers truly eat healthfully.

There's a third and perhaps most significant reason customers may not choose the healthier menu item: It doesn't taste good. Instead of interpreting their lack of interest as "Our customers don't want to eat healthfully," think: "Our customers don't think our 'healthful' options taste good."

Linda Gilbert, author of the 2005 US HealthFocus Trend Report, asserts, "Consumers today feel they are entitled to the best of all possible worlds: both taste and nutrition."

In other words, our customers really do want to eat healthfully; it's just that they also want every meal to taste good.

THE NUTRITION AND TASTE PARADOX

Dr. Steve Witherly, author of the upcoming book *Why People Love Junk Food*, has an equation for why people think nutritious food does not taste good: Food Pleasure = Calories + Sensation. When you decrease the calories, says Dr. Witherly, you must increase the sensation to get comparable food pleasure.

By "sensation," he is referring to flavor, texture, mouthfeel, smell, temperature and spiciness. Together these elements do more than fill you up; Dr. Witherly's research has demonstrated that with current medical technology, it's possible to see how the brain literally lights up more when pleasurable foods are eaten.

Restaurants can't afford menu space for items that don't sell. Is it possible to provide healthful foods that also taste great enough to light up our brains? The answer is a resounding "Yes!" Here are seven ways to get there.

1: RETHINK

Gilbert believes one of the most common mistakes restaurants make when designing healthful dishes is taking the task too seriously.

"They think 'virtuous' instead of 'irresistible,'" she relates. "Rather than addressing the calories or fat first, think flavor. Food needs to be fun."

Her point is a call to action: Abolish the plain grilled chicken, boring iceberg-lettuce salads and off-tasting fat-free dressing.

"Instead of thinking of what can you take out to make a dish lower in calories, start with what the consumer wants and build it up from there," urges Cliff Pleau, executive chef and director of culinary development of Darden Restaurants' three-unit Seasons 52. For example, when designing a Cobb salad, he starts with the chicken and adds tasteful foods like avocado and blue cheese, but in small amounts — only items that contribute to the design and can deliver high-impact flavors even in modest proportions.



At Opus 39, vegetables are at the center of the plate, and protein is an accent.

ED HALL

2: RESIZE

Many of us recognize that customer expectations about portions are much larger than their bodies require. According to Lisa Young, Ph.D., R.D. and author of *The Portion Teller: Smartsizes Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss*, restaurant portions are two to five times larger than they were in the 1970s, and diners have grown used to these outsized portions. How can we downsize our plates without our customers feeling deprived?

The Seasons 52 concept has been successful serving smaller portions — each entrée has fewer than 450 calories — in a traditional menu concept. Meanwhile, the popularity of Spanish restaurants has proven the appeal of smaller, more varied tapas-based menu formats. And, over the last five years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of restaurants offering other versions of small plates, mezze or canapés that boast variety and high-impact flavors and textures, all in modest portions.

Mezza, a Lebanese bistro outside Atlanta, offers a mezze menu ranging from traditional dishes such as hummus and baba ghanoush to innovations like cilantro-garlic fries and a thyme, sesame and olive oil dip. Some restaurants, like A.O.C. and Minibar, both in Los Angeles, have adapted the tapas approach to contemporary American formats, making smaller portions their calling card so that guests can graze through a wide variety of foods, like A.O.C.'s sautéed mushroom persillade and Minibar's Thai snapper and watermelon ceviche.

3: REDEFINE

A recent health-and-nutrition survey conducted by Technomic Inc. asked customers how they define “healthy” when choosing food and beverages away from home.

“Nearly half [45 percent] of all respondents said that ‘fresh’ was the most important characteristic,” explains Bob Goldin, executive vice president of Technomic's Ahead of the Curve research. When asked which descriptors had the strongest associations with freshness, the top-ranked choices were: fresh baked, cooked or made to order, and made on premises.

No wonder we're seeing the “fresh” descriptor everywhere. Diners are making restaurant choices with their noses and eyes. We all love the scent of freshly baked breads, and customers at Pollo Tropical restaurants, a Florida-based quick-serve grilled-chicken concept, know the chicken is “made on premises” because they see the chicken being grilled as soon as they enter the restaurant.

“By offering healthy variety in a visible preparation area, our customers lose the guilt about eating on the run, because they know the food is not only good tasting but good for them,” says Kim Miller, director of marketing.

4: REINFORCE

Often, fresh foods are flavorful enough when prepared simply. “There's no reason to have to add flavor to ‘healthy’ foods,” notes Robert Danhi, consulting chef and an instructor for the Culinary Institute of America. “There are so many healthy foods that are inherently flavorful.”

Danhi points to roasted-tomato salsa, soy sauce, highly aged cheese, fish sauce, mushrooms, sausage and miso as ingredients that, when added in even small amounts, can offer a lot of flavor.

Consumers are also asking for more bold flavors. Remember Dr. Witherly's Food Pleasure equation? When you decrease the calories, one of the ways to get the same food pleasure is to make the flavors bolder. He offers umami, the meaty, savory flavor of foods high in glutamic acid, as a way to reinforce flavors. Some umami-packed foods are aged or fermented, like Parmesan and Roquefort cheese as well as soy and fish sauces. Umami is also found in healthful walnuts, broccoli, tomatoes and mushrooms.

Instead of using excessive fats, Seasons 52's Pleau stresses the importance of “layering in flavor” with cooking techniques like caramelizing and grilling pineapple, and roasting garlic. Citrus zest, spices, herbs and other flavorings like mustard, chile rubs or reduced balsamic vinegar add more layers. He also relies on the texture and crunch of nuts to add interest.

The trend toward layered, intense flavors is emerging in casual and fast-casual multi-units. Applebee's Weight Watchers menu added mango salsa, chipotle seasoning and caramelized onions to its offerings. Baja Fresh offers a chipotle-glazed charbroiled chicken salad with roasted corn, poblano and red peppers and grilled sweet pineapple.

5: REEDUCATE

Some chefs are leading the charge in reeducating their customers about what is healthy.

"Everyone knows collard greens or green beans are good for you," points out Henry Salgado, chef and owner of the Spanish River Grill in New Smyrna Beach, Fla. "But many people have only had vegetables out of a can or vegetables that have been so overcooked that they lack texture or flavor. Our Spicy Collards in Tomato Sauce and our Garlic Green Beans are two of our most popular side items. Preparing fresh takes more time, but I believe people can taste the difference."

Some chefs are being reeducated about how to enhance flavor with minimal fat (*see sidebar*). Johnson & Wales University offers a culinary nutrition program and teaches students how to use the minimum amount of fat to get the maximum flavor.

"For example, you can drizzle a small amount of extra-virgin olive oil on the top of a virtually fat-free soup, and the guest will get the mouthfeel of the oil with the first spoonful," suggests Suzanne Vieira, department chair of the culinary nutrition program. "The fat virtually coats the mouth, so the flavor stays with you throughout the enjoyment of the rest of the soup."

6: REPROPORTION

"American menus typically feature protein plates and vegetarian plates but little in between," reports Greg Drescher, senior director of strategic initiatives at the Culinary Institute of America. One of the easiest ways to cut the calories in a dish without impacting the total serving size is to substitute fruits, vegetables

and high-fiber starches for some of the higher-fat protein portion positioned in the center of the plate. Drescher urges chefs to reconsider protein as the "condiment" of the dish.

Or, as Michael McMillan, executive chef and owner of Opus 39, a fine-dining restaurant in St. Augustine, Fla., says, "We start with the vegetables for the meal and make them the center of the plate, then add the protein in a reasonable portion size to come up with a flavorfully rich dinner that just happens to be lower in calories."

Likewise, the seven-unit Napa Valley Grille puts vegetables front and center, "using ingredients brought in daily from local suppliers," describes Executive Chef Ken Trickilo. The grilled vegetables and focaccia crostini in his Simply Vegetable entrée are enhanced simply with freshly picked herbs, balsamic reduction and oil.

According to the 2005 Dietary Guidelines, we need five to 13 servings of fruits and vegetables a day, yet most of us are getting just 3.6. Technomic's Ahead of the Curve survey found that 88 percent of respondents would like to see more fruits and vegetables on the menu.

7: RECOMMIT

Consumers really do want to eat more healthfully, it's just that they want the food to taste good, too. While the healthy options of the past may not always have been the best sellers, operators should persist in offering good-tasting, healthy alternatives as a long-term strategy for success. Why? Because companies are being evaluated not only on the basis of their bottom line, but also on their response to the needs of the society, and currently almost two-thirds of all us are either overweight or obese, according to the 1999-2002 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.

As the CIA's Drescher told an audience at *Flavor & The Menu's* recent Flavor Event, "We need to put our best culinary talent to work on how to make plant foods — produce, whole grains, nuts and legumes — as sexy as the double-bacon cheeseburger." ☺

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

- ▶ **DOWNSIZE IT:** Tapas, mezze and tasting menus are just a few ways to move away from super-sized plates
- ▶ **A SIDE OF MEAT:** Shift the protein to a side dish or condiment position to really reshape the plate

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