

The Patriot Ledger

HEALTHY EATING: Portion distortion in restaurants

By JOAN ENDYKE

Posted May 28, 2008 @ 08:20 AM

Portion sizes in restaurants remain unrealistically inflated, compared to what people ate 30 years ago – despite rising obesity rates warnings of ensuing health consequences for the American people.

According to the book *The Portion Teller*, pasta entrées have doubled in size, ballooning to an average 3 cup portion, or 600 calories, and that's before any sauce, oil, or butter is added. Throw in some rolls, an oversized portion of chicken parmesan, and a salad swimming in oily dressing and you've got a full-figure dinner of more than 1,500 calories or a day's calories – in a single meal – for an average, older woman. It doesn't stop at Italian food either; most restaurants serve enormous portions of rice, French fries, and mashed potatoes with enough beef, chicken or fish to feed a family of four.

But some restaurants are beginning to wake up and smell the coffee. Perhaps customers would like a night off from cooking but prefer to walk rather than waddle home? A new trend is "half-portions," which could still be a bit more than a standard portion of yesteryear. At least it's a start.

For more than a decade, federal law has mandated packaged food be labeled with nutritional information. With this, and awareness of good nutritional practices, people are choosing products with fewer calories, no trans fats, and items that are low in saturated fat and rich in whole grain. Consumers have driven food manufacturers to offer single-serving items (fewer calories) and to reformulate products to be devoid of trans fat, and made with whole grain.

Imagine a similar scenario in restaurants. If calorie information were noted beside the menu item, wouldn't it be easier to choose a BLT sub at D'Angelo Sandwich Shops (463 calories) instead of the Chicken Caesar Salad at Chili's (1,010 calories)? A trend toward developing tasty, lower-calorie restaurant options would surely follow. In March, New York City began to require chains with 15 or more restaurants to post calories. This will affect only 10 percent of restaurants, but it's a start. The restaurant industry fought against this law. Why? Probably because if consumers knew the Cheesecake Factory's cheesecake would cost them a week in the gym (close to 1,000 calories), they would be more apt to skip it, or share. It boils down to one thing – profit.

Joan Endyke is a registered dietitian with a master's degree in nutrition and food science, and also a certified personal trainer. She is the nutrition director at Fitness Unlimited.

