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Out of proportion

If you've resolved to lose weight in 2006, then scaling back on portions is a good place to start.

By JANET K. KEELER, Times Staff Writer
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It is not easy to eat sensibly in a nation where portions seem better suited for King Kong than his comparatively pint-size descendants.

Slabs of red meat practically hang over the sides of dinner plates. The Super Big Gulp at 7-Eleven holds 44 ounces of liquid candy. Bagels have grown big enough to match the calories of five slices of bread.

The signature burrito at Chipotle Mexican Grill weighs in at more than 2 pounds, and lines are long to place an order at the chain owned by McDonald's. The massive wrap, filled with free-range, organic, hormone-free ingredients, seems healthier than a Big Mac. But be warned: A Chipotle burrito, depending on what you put in it, contains about 1,000 calories and 40 grams of fat. (A Big Mac 560 calories and 30 fat grams.)

Splitting the weighty burrito with a lunch mate or saving half for another meal is probably wise. Those who order the burrito bol, which is the fixings piled in a bowl without the tortilla, save about 350 calories and nearly 20 fat grams. To see how low and high you can go nutrition-wise, check out the nutrition counter at <http://www.chipotlefan.com/>

Old school junk food such as Twinkies (150 calories each) and a petite McDonald's hamburger (260 calories) are starting to look like diet food.

For people resolving to lose weight in 2006, size - and calories - do matter. Cutting portions, and that means being aware when you're eating two to three times what you should, is one way to drop pounds without eliminating favorite foods or entire food groups.

"We have this mentality, that if this is what we are being served, then this is what we should be eating, says **Lisa R. Young, author of *The Portion Teller: Smartsize Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss* (Morgan Road Books, 2004).** "The restaurant is not the food police. You've got to be your own portion police."

Young is a New York University nutrition instructor and researcher who has claimed for years that growing portions, especially from restaurants, have contributed to the expanding waistlines of Americans.

Some of Young's "portion shockers":

A glass of wine at a restaurant or bar is about twice as large as it was in the 1970s.

A typical muffin is more than 6 ounces and is more than an entire day's worth of grains recommended by government nutritionists.

In 1960, a common portion of pasta was 1 1/2 cups. Forty years later, 3 cups of pasta is a "normal" serving.

And so on. When did everything get so out of whack?

"It started slowly, because it went up in increments," Young says. "We didn't notice it until we went 'wow.' The sizes are so big today, c'mon, it's like a joke."

The food we are eating more of, such as pasta, movie popcorn and soda, is inexpensive to provide, Young says. "Even red meat is relatively cheap."

For example, switching from a 6-inch to 12-inch tuna sub at Subway costs only 47 percent more but has 100 percent more calories, Young writes.

We perceive massive quantities as good value for our money and that gives us warm-and-fuzzy feelings about the restaurants we frequent.

Unfortunately, Young says, whatever we're served, we eat. All of it. Which may be why, she says, that a queen-size bed is now 6 inches wider today than it was in the 1970s.

"If you finish everything on your plate (when you eat out), you're eating twice as much as you did 20 years ago," Young says.

Two milestones in 2005, though, indicate our thinking might be shifting from fads toward a more balanced diet. The low-carb, high-fat Atkins Diet fell from favor, and snack packs of thin Oreos, Chips Ahoy and Cheese Nips, and other snacks, hit the market. The smaller portions dole out only 100 calories each, a pittance compared with the snacks we've grown accustomed to.

Could a sensible diet be in our future?

Young has her doubts and says people who want to get healthier will probably have to force the issue.

"I think we've actually lost our ability to feel full," she says. "If you stop (eating) and you wait a few minutes, you would be comfortably satisfied. (But) we don't know when to stop. We stop when the food is gone."

Dr. Steven Masley, author of *Ten Years Younger: The Amazing Ten-Week Plan to Look Better, Feel Better and Turn Back the Clock* (Broadway, \$23.95), says cutting portions alone won't make us slimmer; we need to make better choices when eating out.

Masley, the executive director of the Carillon Executive Health Program of St. Anthony's Hospital in St. Petersburg, suggests ordering a green salad with vinaigrette and a broth-based cup of soup and then splitting an entree. The soup and salad will fill you up, if you heed the signs.

At home, he says, don't serve food family-style from bowls and platters at the table. Dish out single portions in the kitchen and bring full plates - salad size - to the table.

"If we give someone a smaller plate, they'll eat less food," Masley says. "If we give them a basket of cookies, they'll eat more than two. If we dish up in the kitchen and put a couple portions in Tupperware for the next day's lunch, they'll be just as satisfied."

And don't forget to take a brisk walk around the block every day, Masley says.

Eat less, move more, the experts say. In other words, leave the King Kong portions to the apes.

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VISUALIZE THE SIZE

A leafy green salad, broiled fish, mixed vegetables and whole-wheat pasta with fresh tomato sauce is a healthy dinner if you get your proportions right. Here is a cheat sheet from The Portion Teller by Lisa R. Young:

Tossed salad = 2 baseballs

Olive oil dressing = 1/2 shot glass

Broiled fish = 1 checkbook

Mixed vegetables = 1 baseball

Drizzle of olive oil on veggies = 1 water bottle cap

Pasta = 1 baseball

Tomato sauce = 1/2 baseball

Parmesan cheese = 1/2 walnut

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