



October 29, 2008

Calories Do Count

By [KIM SEVERSON](#)

WHEN you're young and tap dance for a living, you don't have to think much about the caloric impact of your next meal. But when three performers who spent the day rehearsing for "Shrek the Musical" walked into a restaurant on 42nd Street recently, they saw on the menu that a Japanese-style beef bowl had 1,090 [calories](#). They decided to head down the street for a salad.

"Counting calories is so 1980s," said Rachel Stern, one of the dancers. "But when it's right there, it's kind of hard to ignore."

For the last few decades, the most popular diets were complex formulas that promised abundant eating with just the right combinations of fat, protein and [carbohydrates](#). Now those regimens are starting to look like exotic mortgages and other risky financing instruments. And just like a reliable savings account, good old calorie counting is coming back into fashion.

"More and more, people are looking at calories in, and calories out," said Dr. Terry Eagan, a Los Angeles psychiatrist, who for 16 years has helped people with [eating disorders](#) and other addictions. "I know some people want something that's sexy and different and new, but there really isn't anything new about weight loss."

Evidence of the calorie's resurgence is everywhere. The makers of Coca-Cola and M&Ms will soon print calories on the front of packages. Consumers, too, are paying more attention, like the diners who discovered that some meals at [Applebee's](#) had more calories than advertised and filed a class-action suit this fall.

New Yorkers got a harsh dose of calorie reality this summer when restaurants with 15 or more outlets were forced to post the calorie content of food next to the price. The resulting sticker shock has brought parts of a great city to its knees, often to do push-ups.

The campaign has inspired lawmakers around the country to follow New York's lead.

Restaurants and food companies are lightening recipes and portion sizes. Starbucks, for example, claims to have saved the nation 17 billion calories since last October by swapping 2 percent milk for whole. The 100-calorie snack is this decade's answer to the fat-free SnackWell cookie, as more brands introduce tiny portions of things like Cool Ranch Doritos and Clif bars.

Dunkin' Donuts recently added a low-calorie egg white breakfast sandwich, Così is using low-fat mayonnaise and McDonald's large French fries have dropped to 500 calories this year from 570 last year. Quiznos is testing smaller sizes and less-caloric sandwich fillings in its New York stores. Cathy Nonas of the New York City health department said this is all a reaction to public-health pressure.

Restaurant corporations say consumer demand, not the threat of legislation, made them change. That's why Yum Brands, which owns KFC, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut and other fast-food restaurants, will start voluntarily posting calorie counts for individual servings in its restaurants nationwide later this year, said Jonathan Blum, a company spokesman.

At Starbucks, a new set of "nutritional guardrails" were put in place over the last year not because of legal mandates but because customers wanted it, said Katie Thomson, the company's nutritionist.

Products were reviewed for calorie and fat content. Bakers were encouraged to substitute healthier ingredients or, if that would compromise taste, to reduce portions, as the company did with its butter croissant. Starbucks also considered how much satiety items would provide, something increasingly important as people cut back on calories, she said.

For some establishments, having their menus exposed by the New York law forced some caloric housecleaning. At Le Pain Quotidien, which has 17 outlets in New York, several items were changed or taken off the menu, said Jack Moran, a vice president.

The popular quiche Lorraine was trimmed to 6 ounces from 11, with extra salad filling out the plate. Sweets like brownies may shrink, too.

But consumers who think smaller portions will mean smaller prices are likely out of luck. The prices on some of the chain's newly slimmed down items haven't dropped, but that doesn't seem to be affecting sales.

"Everything we consider to have a good caloric rating is marching up the charts," Mr. Moran said.

The Atlantic smoked salmon tartine, with 350 calories, was always a good middle-of-the-pack seller among the 15 open-face sandwiches that are a specialty at the chain. After the calorie counts were posted, it became a top seller, edging out the longstanding favorite, the grilled chicken and smoked mozzarella tartine, which has 690 calories and costs about \$3 less.

Reducing calories is now a company-wide quest, and the chain is posting calorie counts in its restaurants in Washington and Los Angeles.

If reduced portion sizes remain popular with customers, it could help restaurant operators who have been bearing big jumps in food costs this year, Mr. Moran and other restaurateurs said.

Public health officials acknowledge that people rarely change their eating habits overnight, and that there is a lot more to good [nutrition](#) than simply counting calories. Still, they are trying to make sure consumers stay calorie conscious. Just to hammer the point home, the New York City health department earlier this month put signs inside subway cars pointing out that most people need only about 2,000 calories a day.

The number of calories in food shocked most New Yorkers, according to a September survey by the health department. A Starbucks blueberry scone delivers 480 calories. A Quiznos regular tuna melt is 1,270 calories. Wraps, the refuge for low-carb sandwich lovers, can top 800 calories. Bagels pack more calories than doughnuts. A large bucket of buttered movie popcorn has more than half the calories anyone should eat in a day.

Even people for whom nutrition is a way of life had no idea how many calories they were eating. Kate Adamick, a consultant who helps corporations and school districts improve their food, took a hard look at her Starbucks habit, which included bran muffins and chocolate [cookies](#).

“Just because I work in the food world, I am not immune from this human tendency to self-delude,” she said. “I can look at a cookie that is the size of a man’s hand and think it’s only twice as big as a regular cookie, but it actually has the caloric content of four or five cookies.”

Posting calories on menus is a kind of Hail Mary pass for health officials trying to slow rates of [diabetes](#) and [obesity](#). But it is catching on fast. California last month became the first state to require calorie counts, although that law is less restrictive than New York’s.

In all, nearly three dozen states, cities and counties have passed or introduced laws that would require calorie posting in some form. More are in the works, said Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy for the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#), which frequently criticizes the food industry.

Two proposals moving through Congress would make calorie postings uniform nationwide. One, the Labeling Education and Nutrition Act, is backed by the restaurant industry and would give restaurants and grocery stores selling prepared foods a choice of labeling formats, including posters near the cash register or disclosures on the back of the menu. It would pre-empt tougher laws, like New York’s.

A second proposal, the Menu Education and Labeling Act, is supported by public health advocates and more closely mirrors New York’s law. It would not pre-empt more stringent local laws.

Of course, for the calorie's comeback to be sustained, people who are not already focused on a healthy diet will have to begin paying attention.

At a Chipotle near Brooklyn Borough Hall, Daniela Castillo, 18, dishes up carnitas between classes at [Brooklyn College](#). The customers talking calories, she said, are mostly women, and mostly slimmer older women. Men, especially the younger ones, just ask for everything, and often ask her to double the portions.

“I think it's kind of a middle-age thing, counting calories,” she said.

People might be changing their eating habits, but some restaurant owners remain skeptical — especially those who have already offered lower calorie food only to see those items languish.

“We talk skinny and eat fat,” said Tim Ryan, president of the [Culinary Institute of America](#).

And it has been that way for a century.

The first calorie-centric weight-loss guide, “Diet and Health, With a Key to the Calories” by Dr. Lulu Hunt Peters, was published in 1918 to great acclaim. Her weight-loss formula? Eat in 100-calorie portions, and no more than 1,200 a day.

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