

Delicious, Nutritious Dining Out Does Exist

BY Hope Damon

PHOTOGRAPHY BY Kevin Davis

Americans love to eat out — we spend nearly half of our food dollars on food prepared away from home. Most of us eat at least one third of our calories from restaurant and takeout foods. Dashboard dining — eating in the car — is common. We appreciate the spontaneous, casual lifestyle associated with eating out. But people generally eat more when eating out; in fact, children consume almost twice as many calories when they eat a meal in a restaurant than they do at home.

Even though we eat out frequently, our attitudes suggest we think of eating out as a special occasion, thus justifying food choices that are richer and less nutritious than those we might eat at home. What does a dietitian suggest for healthier eating out?

Strategy #1: Pack a positive attitude about choosing food thoughtfully.

Decide if this particular meal is truly a special occasion — or perhaps it is the need for convenience, lack of planning, an impulse or socializing that has you reading the restaurant menu again. Calmly remind yourself that you can eat healthy anywhere (with thought and effort) and *you will feel good about it*. Appreciate that you are not working in the kitchen, you do not have to do the dishes, the server is pleasant, and the atmosphere is fun. It is not only the food that makes eating out special.

Strategy #2: Think ahead.

Choose restaurants with a variety of options. It helps to look at the menu online before you go, and



Hope Damon enjoys a healthy meal at a local restaurant.

many restaurants now have nutrition information available. While it is not necessary to count every last calorie, carb or fat gram, it can be helpful to compare some of your favorite choices. You may be surprised at the numbers and decide that some items are not worth the calorie content. Or

you may notice healthier items that are worth considering.

Strategy #3: Choose your food mindfully.

People who practice mindful eating regularly become better at eating selectively rather than

being a member of the “clean plate club”. Mindful eating is becoming a buzzword in the nutrition world. Simply, it means making deliberate food choices — not necessarily only healthy foods but items you think are worth it to you — then eating with thoughtful attention to savor every bite. This usually means eating slower and with less distraction — not so easy in a busy restaurant, but extremely helpful to moderate your intake.

Perhaps you love fried fish. You might mindfully decide that the fish is worth the calorie and fat content, but you will save ordering fries for another time. Or you acknowledge that you almost always have dessert, even if you are already full, so you order a lighter main meal to allow for dessert.

Strategy #4: How much is enough?

How much is enough? A “portion” is how much food you choose to eat. A “serving” is a standard amount set by the FDA. Restaurant portion sizes are easily double, often triple, the suggested serving sizes. Consider that the chef serves the same size meal to everyone who orders it — but we certainly do not all need the same amount of food!

Recently I was looking at the nutrition info for a franchise casual dining restaurant. At first, I thought the numbers were fairly moderate — until I realized they were listed for half the amount in an order! Simple approaches to limiting your portions include sharing entrees or desserts, requesting extra vegetables (perhaps substituting them for fried sides), and considering that an appetizer may well be plenty for a dinner entrée.



Strategy #5: Have it your way.

Take your time looking at your menu options, no matter how rushed you feel or how hectic the restaurant is. Most restaurants will accommodate reasonable requests, such as a side order of vegetables instead of the fat-laden white carbs. Often there is a bean or whole grain pilaf with a heavier meat that you could request to have with the fish or chicken entrees. It doesn't hurt to ask!

Strategy #6: Liquid calories count!

Beverages can considerably increase the empty calorie content of meals. Accompany every meal with water so you quench your thirst with that good, simple taste. Then decide how much of the other beverages you really value.

I believe that food is one of life's greatest pleasures. I also believe that taking good care of our bodies improves quality of life and is worth the effort. So the balance achieved by eating mindfully, enjoying every bite we have, and valuing healthy eating works for both health and pleasure. Good luck! **K**

Hope Damon, RD, LD, CDE provides nutrition counseling with humor and kindness at The Nutrition Counseling Center in New London, N.H. She enjoys mindfully eating everything!

Kevin Davis shoots people for a living, but only with his camera. You can see more of his work at www.kevindavisphotos.com



Food Court S.O.S.

If you're on the road all day or spending the day shopping, eat a breakfast that includes protein and wholegrain before you go. A homemade egg sandwich on whole wheat toast with fresh spinach or sliced tomato is quick and filling. Or a plain Greek yogurt with added fresh fruit and slivered nuts offers good staying power. Then go to lunch before you are too tired to think straight! Better options: thin crust veggie pizza; basic (not grilled but toasted) sandwiches (be aware of the size and perhaps share), smaller salads with low fat dressings and caution about richer ingredients (cheese really isn't your best friend); broth-based soups like vegetable, minestrone, beef barley, chicken and rice or a filling split pea, black bean or lentil soup. Look for healthy menu symbols that cue you to smaller, leaner items.