Fast food

Adding health to the menu

The health message is back. With no small fanfare, McDonald’s, Burger King, and Wendy’s have reintroduced entrée salads; KFC is once again offering a nonfried chicken meal; and Taco Bell is letting customers substitute salsa for cheese and sauce in any menu item. Some chains are even promoting what amounts to a burger salad for consumers counting carbohydrates.

It’s easy to be cynical about the déjà-vu menus. After all, “diet” dishes such as the McLean burger have come and gone. Double burgers and fried chicken haven’t left the building. (The Carl’s Jr. chain rolled out a 1-pound burger in May.) And the new, healthful-sounding alternatives come in the wake of a wave of criticism: As the public has become increasingly aware that round is not the best shape to be in, obese patrons have sued McDonald’s, and proposed legislation would force all chain restaurants to display nutrition information.

The new, healthful-sounding dishes also come in the face of increased competition from slightly more upscale fast-food restaurants such as Baja Fresh, Cosi, and Panera Bread. They don’t claim that their food is especially good for you, but the reputation of the traditional fast-fooders is low enough that any alternative is apt to be seen as more healthful.

Are roasted chicken and salads always the best choices? Are they more nutritious at the fancier chains than at mainstays such as McDonald’s and Burger King? To find out, we compared the nutritional profiles of 36 chicken sandwiches and salads from 16 chains and sent two sensory experts to the restaurants to taste the same items at several locations.

We found big differences in nutrition: A chicken sandwich can provide 360 calories and 7 grams of fat (at Wendy’s) or 950 calories and 56 grams of fat (at Panera Bread). And we found big differences in taste, from fair to excellent. As a rule, the fancier spots had tastier food, but it often weighed more and had more calories.

FAST FOOD UNDER FIRE

For his movie “Super Size Me,” filmmaker Morgan Spurlock ate three meals a day at McDonald’s for 30 days, saying yes whenever he was offered the supersize option. He gained 24 pounds; his cholesterol level rose; his liver, his doctor said, was “like paté.” Few people would do what he did, but enough come close that fast food has been under siege.

Americans go to fast-food restaurants often and eat too much there. A recent Gallup poll found that 95 percent of Americans eat fast food at least a few times a year and that more than half eat it at least once a week. The trouble is that people seem to eat more when they eat out.

According to a study of more than 17,000 adults and children published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association last October, on days when participants ate fast food, they consumed more calories and fat than on other days. The Obesity Working Group of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration cited a similar long-term trend in a report released in March. Since the 1970s, it said, “total calories from food consumed outside the home, especially from quick-service restaurants, increased from 18 percent to 32 percent. In addition, food consumed outside the home was higher per meal in calories, total fat, and saturated fat.”

One change since the 1970s is a dramatic rise in portion size, says Lisa Young, an adjunct assistant professor of nutrition at New York University. The serving of french fries that McDonald’s now calls “small” (2.6 oz.) is slightly larger than what used to be the chain’s only fry size. Although McDonald’s recently announced that it would phase out supersizing by the end of this year, a large order of fries will
still be 6 ounces—two and a half times the size of an original fry order.

**Fast-food companies are making modest efforts to respond to criticism.** In addition to nixing supersizing and introducing entree salads, McDonald's reggiggered its kids' Happy Meal in June to let consumers order apple slices and caramel dip instead of fries, and milk or apple juice instead of soda. That's nice (though caramel isn't exactly health food). But when will McDonald's honor its promise, made in 2002, to switch to a frying oil with fewer trans-fatty acids that raise levels of "bad" cholesterol in the blood? In February 2003, the company announced that it would "extend the timeframe by which it will introduce a change in cooking oil to reduce trans-fatty acids and saturated fats in its fried-food menu."

Since then, no action. The chain does not list trans-fatty acids in its nutrition information, as both Burger King and Wendy's do. (Subway says it is "in the process" of obtaining these data.)

As for McDonald's salads, a spokeswoman said that the chain sold 150 million last year. That sounds like a lot, until you realize that McDonald's serves 23 million customers a day in the U.S. or more than 160 million customers every week.

Last November, Burger King hired its first chief nutrition officer, Joanne Lichten, a public-relations liaison who oversaw the creation of a nutrition-facts poster that appeared in outlets in May. The poster highlights items with less fat and fewer calories and carbs. (See Food Wise below for more on fast-food nutrition.)

Curiously, around the same time that the posters were rolled out, Burger King took an almost-new line of low-fat Fire-Grilled Chicken Baguette sandwiches off its national menu. "There is a new preference for the TenderCrisp line and salads," said Lichten. In terms of calories (810) and fat (47 grams), the TenderCrisp Chicken Sandwich looks a lot like the Original Whopper with Cheese.

Many fast-food restaurants are offering or testing low-carb foods, but those may not be low-cal. The highest-calorie carb-counter's choice we've seen: the Carl's Jr. Low Carb Breakfast Bowl, with eggs, sausage, bacon, ham, and cheese. It has 900 calories and 73 grams of fat, including 33 grams of saturated fat—more fat and saturated fat than many people should eat in a day. "You can't advertise 'Eat Less,'" says Young of NYU. "That's the

---

**WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW CAN PUT ON POUNDS**

Mayonnaise, cheese, regular salad dressing, and fried foods are generally packed with calories, fat, or sodium. Bread, potatoes (baked and fried), ketchup, and apple pie typically contain a lot of carbohydrates. When you're watching your weight or counting nutrients, you learn to do without—or with less of—these kinds of foods.

But how are you to know that a Smokehouse Turkey Panini at Panera Bread has 170 more calories and 15 more grams of fat if you order it on Asiago Focaccia instead of on Artisan Three Cheese Bread? Or that a plain bagel at Au Bon Pain weighs a quarter-pound and—without any spread—has as many calories as an Egg McMuffin? Or that a raisin bran muffin at Au Bon Pain has almost as many calories (530 vs. 590) as a chocolate chunk muffin? For about the same number of calories, you could drink a 16-ounce-Thick Shake at McDonald's.

The answer, of course, is that if nutrition information isn't in the store—or you haven't done an online search before leaving home—you won't know those things. You also won't know how much you save by asking to hold the mayo on a Burger King Original Whopper (160 calories and 18 grams of fat).

For an idea of how calories accumulate, see the graphic at right. We've provided data for two foods in the Ratings. Totals are rounded.

"You can't tell a consumer to make an educated choice and not give them the information," says Lisa Young, an adjunct assistant professor of nutrition at New York University. We agree. The Obesity Working Group of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommended in March that restaurants provide nutrition labeling for consumers. Such a program would have to be voluntary, because the FDA has no power to mandate such a campaign. Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) and Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) have introduced legislation requiring nutritional information to be displayed in restaurants with 20 or more outlets and on vending machines.
problem. So people are sucked into the low-carb initiative."

Upstart, upscale fast-food chains have arrived. In the past few years, fast-food chains that charge a little more for more varied—some advertise “fresher”—fare have blanketed the U.S. The fastest growing of these spots, which the industry calls “fast casual,” include sandwich shop/bakeries and Mexican-food chains. Many have only hundreds of outlets per chain vs. tens of thousands for fast-food majors, but some have big backers: McDonald’s owns Chipotle; Wendy’s owns Baja Fresh.

You generally wait in line to be served, as at conventional fast-food restaurants. We came across one exception: At dinnertime, waitstaff at Costi came to our table. Our consultants saw no drive-up windows. Overall, these chains served as quickly as the mainstay competitors—3 to 4 minutes, once our experts reached the counter—and they often have a nicer décor. Some use china and stainless-steel flatware instead of plastic. The Atlanta Bread Company and Panera Bread outlets we visited even had fireplaces.

The food tends to be more complex: Instead of the standard lettuce, tomato, and mayonnaise, for example, a chicken sandwich might be served with roasted tomatoes, basil, spinach, provolone, and pesto mayonnaise.

NEWS FROM OUR TESTS

There’s a wide range in the nutritional content of the foods we studied: from 360 to 950 calories for a chicken sandwich, and 310 to 800 calories for an entrée salad with chicken. Considering that many people should take in about 2,000 calories per day, you might think twice about ordering the higher-calorie items. Add a soda, side dish, and dessert, and you could feel the need to restrict yourself to a lettuce leaf for the rest of the day.

There’s also a wide range in taste, from fair to excellent. The two Chipotle choices we tried are especially tasty, while two of the three items from Bliimpie are only fair.

Overall, our tests indicated that you’re more likely to get high-quality, good-tasting food at one of the fancier fast-food restaurants than at one of the regular chains, but there’s a trade-off: The fancier dishes tend to be bigger and have more calories and fat. Exceptions that earn praise for both nutrition and taste: the taco and salad from Baja Fresh.

HOW TO CHOOSE

**Count calories.** Look to the top of each Ratings category for foods with the fewest calories. Save tasty, higher-calorie dishes for an occasional treat or if you’re willing to share, take some home, or change your order slightly. “Have it your way” isn’t only for Burger King customers anymore. Many restaurants let you choose different breads, fixings, or dressings.

**Order grilled food, rather than breaded or fried.**

**Avoid or limit toppings.** Skip cheese on sandwiches; limit or eliminate croutons, bacon, and cheese on salads.

**Avoid mayo and high-calorie dressings.** Substitute mustard on sandwiches; with salads, ask for dressing on the side and use little, or use low-cal.

**Control portions.** Choose the smallest sandwich at restaurants that sell different sizes, such as Quiness Sub, or order one taco. Share a larger sandwich or save some for later. A sandwich that we don’t recommend sharing: Panera Bread’s Tuscan Chicken on Rosemary & Onion Focaccia. Even half of it has 475 calories and 28 grams of fat.

If you’re concerned about sodium, fat, or carbs, check the Ratings, where you’ll see that the Bliimpie Buffalo Chicken Hot Sub and the Chipotle salad have about as much sodium as a person should consume in an entire day and that the Chipotle and Taco Bell salads are highest in carbs (they include rice and beans).

Many chains offer lower-carb fare. Subway, for instance, sells Atkins-endorsed wraps. We tried a few and found that the wrap itself was slightly sweet and doughy. But the taste was barely noticeable when blended with the other flavors in the sandwich. Quinness Sub, which claims to have “more low-carb options than anyone on the planet,” will let you order “low-carb toasty flatbread” for any of its sandwiches. Burger King and McDonald’s will give you a burger or a chicken breast with lettuce and tomatoes, without bun or dressing, in a side-salad container. Wendy’s is test-marketing similar menu items.

**SALADS WITH CHICKEN**

- **21** Subway Garden Fresh Salad with chicken
- **22** Baja Fresh Baja Ensalada with charbroiled chicken
- **23** Bliimpie Grilled Chicken Salad
- **24** Burger King Fire-Grilled Chicken Caesar Salad
- **25** McDonald’s Grilled Chicken Caesar Salad
- **26** Quiness Sub Chicken Caesar Salad
- **28** Atlanta Bread Company Chipotle Chicken Salad
- **29** Quiness Sub Chicken Caesar Salad
- **30** Wendy’s Mandarin Chicken Salad
- **31** Subway Grilled Chicken and Baby Spinach Salad
- **32** Corner Bakery Café Chopped Salad
- **33** Taco Bell Regular Style Zesty Chicken Border Bowl
- **34** Chipotle Burrito Bowl with chicken
- **35** Au Bon Pain Grilled Chicken Caesar Salad
- **36** Boston Market Marinated Grilled Chicken Caesar Salad

Guide to the Ratings

Nutrition figures per serving are based on manufacturers’ data when available and are rounded. When unavailable, based on lab analysis. We ordered most products as is. Where sandwiches are made to order, we chose additions such as tomato, lettuce, mayo, and cheese. Some orders came with pickles, chips, or other
fast foods

numbers indicate Quick Picks; see box at right.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size (oz.)</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Calories</th>
<th>Fat (g)</th>
<th>Sat. Fat (g)</th>
<th>Carbs (g)</th>
<th>Sodium (mg)</th>
<th>Fiber (g)</th>
<th>Taste</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>$3.50</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1,580</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1,040</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1,020</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>910</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>970</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>2,570</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1,880</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1,580</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1,630</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1,760</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>1,410</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>580</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1,590</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>980</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>1,630</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>1,260</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>740</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>1,660</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>910</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>1,970</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2,130</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1,690</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>860</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1,730</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1,460</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1,520</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1,460</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1,540</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1,550</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>710</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1,780</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>1,640</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>2,390</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1,480</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1,770</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CR Quick Recommendations

As the Ratings show, chicken sandwiches and salads tend to be tastier at the newer, fancier fast-food restaurants than at the old mainstays. But they also tend to cost slightly more, weigh slightly more, and come with more elaborate toppings, which can add calories.

Chick-fil-A foods are tops for taste but are relatively high-calorie. Bimbo's fared worse than some other restaurants: Although its Grilled Chicken Hot Sub and salad are fairly low in calories, they're less tasty than most, and Bimbo's sandwiches are pricier than many others from major fast-food chains.

The Ratings list sandwiches and salads in order of fewest to most calories. Quick Picks highlights items that can be recommended without reservation—they offer the best combination of nutrition, taste, and, generally, price—followed by tasty choices you can easily tweak to make more healthful.

QUICK PICKS

BEST OVERALL. For the best mix of nutrition, taste, and, generally, price:

**SANDWICHES**

2 Baja Fresh $3.80

Chunks of flavorful chicken, chopped onion and cilantro, and mild salsa in a soft corn tortilla. Very fresh-tasting.

4 Quiznos Sub $4.30

Strips or chunks of roasted chicken breast with honey bourbon mustard and sauce with smoky BBQ notes on a toasted, very fresh whole-wheat baguette.

5 McDonald's $3.30

A thick piece of marinated chicken breast with fresh lettuce and tomato, plus mayo, on a fresh sesame seed bun. Chicken was served nice and hot.

**SALADS**

21 Subway $5.80

Sliced chicken breast, grape tomatoes, red onion, carrots, cucumbers, green pepper, and black olives, with red wine vinaigrette and croutons on iceberg and romaine lettuce and baby spinach. The greens sometimes had a bagged-lettuce flavor, not very noticeable when the salad was mixed.

22 Baja Fresh $6.80

Chunks of chicken, tortilla strips, shaved cheese, tomato, and Pico de Gallo salsa, with fat-free salsa verde dressing on romaine lettuce. A large, very fresh, simple salad.

**IF CARBS MATTER**

Try almost any salad, but limit or skip croutons, rice, beans, or crispy noodles.

**BEST FOR DO-IT-YOURSELVES**

The following items taste very good or excellent. They also offer good nutrition, but only if you tweak them as noted:

**SANDWICHES**

Skip cheese and spread, or share:

15 Boston Market $4.70

16 Chipotle $5.65

18 Atlanta Bread Company $6.75

**SALADS**

Get dressing on the side or use low-fat; limit cheese, croutons, crispy noodles:

26 Cosi $6.80

27 Panera Bread $6.60

29 Quiznos Sub $4.80

30 Wendy's $4.80

34 Chipotle $5.65

extras; they’re not included in nutrition data. Daily values when consuming 2,000 calories per day: 65 g fat, 20 g saturated fat, 2,400 mg sodium, 25 g fiber. Taste is based on the evaluation of two sensory experts who traveled to eight states to visit a total of four outlets of each chain. Price is what we paid, to the nearest nickel.