

from the **October 26, 2007** edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1026/p18s01-hfes.html>

Large is back – in a very big way

Size designations have become more straightforward in the land of fast food – but the portions are still way too big.

By [Ruth Walker](#)

A colleague reports an interesting piece of data for the annals of language: an indication that large may actually be reverting to its original meaning.

She stopped by her local quick-service eatery (or maybe it was a drive-through-ery) to order orange juice, and since she wanted more than just a couple of swallows, she felt she'd better order a "large."

"Are you sure?" came the reply from the woman at the counter. "It's 32 ounces." She added that she usually explained this to customers since she found they generally weren't expecting such a volume. "We get a lot of truckers in here." They evidently like to get their vitamin C without downshifting any more than is absolutely necessary.

At this point my colleague downsized her order.

[Large](#) comes from a Latin root meaning abundant, copious, or plentiful. (An older meaning of "liberated, set free," lives on in our idiom "at large.") That sounds like all one could want, doesn't it? Large lacks the "grand" tone of great, and it's just a nick more formal than big.

There is a "more is more" mind-set that prevails in the United States generally, where even too much is never enough: The smallest box of detergent is labeled "large," the next up is "giant," and then come "jumbo," "colossal," and so on.

Thus even those who provide merely "enough" (and there should be no shame in that) want to claim they are providing "more than enough." If there are two sizes of a product, they are often labeled "regular" and "large," rather than "small" and "large." Doing some independent research at my own source of takeout orange juice, I found two sizes, "medium" and "large." There was no sign of a "small."

But my colleague seems to have bumped into another countertrend in American commerce: the continuing upsizing of everything in fast-food land, which is where much of our national eating goes on.

Nearly half of the nation's food budget goes to meals away from home. I was going to call that "dining out," but it looked silly on the screen: We all know that much of that is fast food.

And the fast-food chains have been engaging in some significant relabeling of their offerings that may lead customers to think they're ordering more sensibly sized portions.

Three years ago, Wendy's dropped its Biggie and Great Biggie size designations in favor of small, medium, and large. How straightforward. But the new "large" drink is 42 ounces, which may be too much even for our OJ-loving truckers.

Or maybe not. The 7-Eleven chain offers a 64-ounce Double Gulp soda – which I suppose is some sort of equivalent of the long-recommended eight glasses of liquid daily, just in a different form, and all at one whack, or one slosh.

And remember when a Big Mac was a big deal? At three ounces of beef, it hardly stands up against some of the 12-ounce burgers introduced by some of the other chains. It's now possible to get two days' supply of meat in a single bun. How efficient.

Nutritionist *Lisa R. Young*, to whose report on the MSNBC [website](#) last week I am indebted for much of the above information, says that current fast-food servings are two to five times the size they were in the 1950s.

When McDonald's first opened, for instance, a soda was seven ounces. Today, the kiddie size is 12 ounces. She asks, "Are we that much thirstier or hungrier than we used to be?"

As a lover of language and a battler against blather, I have to commend the straightforwardness of the new/old nomenclature: If there are three sizes, they ought to be small, medium, and large. As someone who's concerned about what seems to be materialistic overload everywhere around us, when I consider a half-gallon soda, I want to scream, "Stop! Enough already!"

And that's about the size of it.