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As portions plump up, so do waistlines

By Aleta Watson
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Dinner at a popular chain restaurant in Milpitas arrives in a wide white bowl -- at least four cups of spaghetti and meat sauce topped with three meatballs weighing three ounces each. It's billed as a single serving. And it's worth 2,270 calories.

When nutritionists rail about the role of outsize portions in the growth of America's waistlines, this is the sort of dish they decry. It represents more than a day's worth of food for an active, middle-aged woman or a sedentary man, according to government guidelines.

Venti mochas, two-fisted muffins, jumbo burgers, platter-sized steaks and mountains of pasta have become everyday fare for a nation that now spends nearly half its food budget on meals away from home.

"We have a phenomenon where we're served more and we eat more," says **Lisa R. Young**, a nutrition professor at New York University who has tracked the growth of portion sizes in American restaurants in the past three decades. In that time, average calorie consumption rose by more than 500 a day per person, to 2,757 in 2003. Federal guidelines say most adults need 2,000 to 2,600 calories a day.

Critics of big food portions were encouraged when a recent report commissioned by the Food and Drug Administration for the first time called on restaurants to shrink serving sizes and redesign menus to include reduced-calorie dishes. It cited statistics categorizing two out of three Americans as overweight and 30 percent as obese.

In careful, academic language, the report concluded that eating out "can be a factor in determining calorie consumption and body weight, and an important one for many individuals." It recommended that restaurants post calorie counts for their food where it's easy to see and suggested that restaurants, government agencies and health

organizations work together to encourage more healthful approaches to eating out.

Restaurants beg to differ

The National Restaurant Association, which represents the country's 920,000 restaurant locations, countered that consumers are responsible for the choices they make.

“There wasn't a fair understanding or fair representation of what is available in restaurants,” Sheila Cohn, the NRA's director of nutrition policy, said of the report. She pointed out that many places now offer small plates and it's still possible to get a small burger at fast-food outlets. “There are more portion choices today than there ever were.”

Some restaurants do offer large servings in an appeal to diners who seek value for their money, Cohn said. “Over 90 percent of restaurants provide take-away containers that make it possible to turn today's dinner into tomorrow's lunch.”

Such arguments don't impress nutritionists, who say Americans have adjusted their perception of how much is appropriate to eat based on how much is placed before them when they eat away from home. That huge bowl of spaghetti with meatballs from Romano's Macaroni Grill in Milpitas, one of the few food chains that post complete nutritional information for all their offerings on the Internet, is an extreme example.

“That's like three hamburgers,” said Jennifer Morris, a Los Gatos nutritionist who has worked on childhood obesity projects and counsels individuals on healthful eating habits. She advises people who are watching their diets to get take-out containers at the beginning of their meal and box up part of the food before they even begin eating. “Half of that” would be OK as a meal, she said. “I would say, considering the size of the meatballs, a third would be better.”

Even if diners take doggie bags home, they still tend to eat more than they would if they were served smaller portions, said Barbara Rolls, a professor of nutrition at Pennsylvania State University, who studies the effects of portion size on food consumption. In her research, women and men, whether thin or heavy, ate significantly more as their servings were increased.

`` I think people often don't know how many calories are in a portion," Rolls said.

Finding the calorie count for a dish can be difficult. McDonald's made headlines when it announced it would print nutritional information on its packaging, but most restaurants don't make the information easy to find. Some chains post details only on their special healthful offerings. Most -- including white tablecloth dinner houses -- offer no information at all, arguing that it's impossible to provide consistently accurate calorie counts when ingredients and menus change frequently and each cook puts a slightly different twist on a dish.

Representatives of Brinker International -- the parent company of Macaroni Grill, Chili's, On the Border and Maggiano's Little Italy -- said there was no one available to comment on this story.

Can't blame the couch

The Center for Science in the Public Interest has conducted independent analysis of many restaurant foods and the numbers can be staggering. A chef's salad can run 930 calories with dressing; a patty melt and french fries, 1,350 calories; chicken fajitas, 840 calories; an order of kung pao chicken, 1,620 calories. (The kung pao chicken, though, is likely to be shared among a table of diners.)

`` Once you add in an appetizer, a side dish, a beverage and a dessert, it's very easy for people to eat a whole day's calories at a sitting at a restaurant without realizing it," says Margo Wootan, CSPI's director of nutrition policy.

A moderately active woman from between 31 and 50 years old needs about 2,000 calories a day; a moderately active middle-aged man requires 2,400 to 2,600 calories a day. (The higher figure applies to men at the younger end of the age range.)

Wootan's organization wants legislation requiring restaurants to post nutritional information on menus to help consumers make informed choices.

`` Right now, people are completely in the dark about what they're being served," Wootan said.

Even trained nutritionists find it hard to estimate the caloric tab for a restaurant meal, notes Marian Nestle, a New York University professor

and author of ``What to Eat." She likes to tell the story of the risotto she enjoyed at a New York restaurant years ago only to learn later that it contained 1,280 calories and 110 grams of fat for a lunch portion.

She doesn't have much patience with those who argue that Americans are getting fatter because we're a nation of couch potatoes.

``It's not activity. We were sedentary 20 years ago," Nestle said.
``We're eating more."

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