

Super-sizing bucks healthy-eating trend

High-calorie menu items provide the "satisfaction" factor

By Lauren Kramer

Just when words like "South Beach" and "Atkins" were becoming a comfortable fit in our vocabulary, the super-sizes have returned to some fast-food restaurant chains, sending calorie counts skyrocketing.

Burger King launched an Enormous Omelet Sandwich in March. And Hardee's Restaurants added the 2-pound "Monster Thickburger" to the menu in November 2004, following the successful introduction at Carl's Junior Restaurants of the "Double Six Dollar Burger."

Those two items have been driving sales for the fiscal year ending January 2005, says Brad Haley, executive vice-president of marketing for the two restaurants, which are owned by CKE of Carpinteria, Calif.

"Carl's Junior was up 7.7 percent, while Hardee's was up 7 percent in same-store sales increases, and it was Thickburgers in general that were responsible for those increases," he says.

Just over a year ago, the low-carbohydrate menu items at Hardee's and Carl's Junior were driving sales, the Lettuce-Wrapped Low-Carb Burgers, in particular.

"Both restaurants have a variety of items for people interested in watching calories, fat and carbohydrate intake," says Haley. "Our low-carb menu items were very popular when they first came out in January 2004, but now the low-carb diet fad has cooled somewhat."

When CKE conducted research to find out what their diners wanted in a meal, they found that people believed the burgers served at fast-food chains were not as satisfying in size and quality as those ordered at sit-down restaurants.

"As a result, our goal was to target restaurant quality in our burgers, not just size," says Haley.

"Often, that means higher-quality ingredients, like 100 percent Angus beef, red onions, better pickles and we butter and grill the buns. But at a sit-down restaurant, the burgers themselves are bigger; they're 1/2-pound and 1/3-pound burgers, usually available as singles or doubles."

Hardee's Monster Thickburgers contain 1,420 calories and 107 grams of fat, while the Double Six Dollar Burger also has 1,420 calories and 101 fat grams.

"But the younger guys are not too concerned about calorie counts," says Haley.

The population demographic ordering these meals at the two restaurants is young men age 18 to 35.

"They tend to be young and active, and are more concerned about having a great-tasting burger than they are about nutritional content," Haley adds.

"In many cases, those guys were telling us they'd have to buy more than one of the traditional-sized fast-food hamburgers to fill themselves up."

Equating size with value is an irrational logic that's engrained in the American consciousness, says Lisa Young, a registered dietician and adjunct professor at New York University. And it's a fact known all too well in the restaurant industry.

"Consumers have always demanded value when they eat out," says Jim Papadakis of Icelandic USA, which recently introduced Big Bob's Belly Buster Colossal Shrimp, a battered product for casual-dining venues. "Larger portions for a good price equal value in the customers' minds — this is nothing new. While they may not eat the entire portion they still want to see the larger portions on their plates."

Consumers know that large portions of high-calorie fast food is unhealthy for them, says Young, the author of "The Portion Teller: Smartsizes your way to Permanent Weight Loss," published by Random House in May.

"Fast food is notoriously high in saturated fat and sodium, and no one should be eating it in such large amounts," she says. "I think most people know that, but when they see it on the menu, it's a bargain,



Photo courtesy of CKE

and it's fun. The cheaper the food gets and the bigger it gets, the more the appeal."

That's certainly been Burger King's finding since it introduced the Enormous Omelet Sandwich in March.

"Between March 21 and April 15 2005, we sold about 4 million Enormous Omelet Sandwiches in the United States," says Joseph Gerbino, Burger King's manager of external communications.

Like Hardee's and Carl's Junior, Burger King's target with this menu item was young males ages 18 to 24, "people looking for a nice, hardy breakfast on the go," says Gerbino.

Weighing in at 760 calories, the Enormous Omelet Sandwich contains 50 fat grams and 2,080 milligrams of sodium. It's a heavy-weight, even when compared to Burger King's Whopper Sandwich, which contains 700 calories, 42 grams of fat and 1,020 milligrams of sodium.

"Size is only one channel to the customer, though I think there's certainly a customer segment that equates value with getting maximum fill out of their meal," says Gerbino.

"The makeup of our menu is driven by what our customers are interested in buying, and when we tested the Enormous Omelet Sandwich with customers, it was a highest-rated product."

Gerbino is quick to add that Burger King is the only national fast-food chain to offer a vegetarian

The 2-pound Monster Thickburger, packing a whopping 1,420 calories and 107 grams of fat, drove Hardee's sales up 7 percent in 2004.

burger among other items targeted at health- and weight-conscious diners. The company also offers fire-grilled salads, a Grilled Chicken Whopper that has proved popular and a promise that customers can "Have it Your Way," customizing any menu items to their preference or dietary requirements.

"That's not enough, says Young. "I feel that there are certain foods that just shouldn't be there," she insists. "The fast-food industry takes advantage of the fact that consumers will buy larger portions, and the food is really cheap to produce. So it becomes a bargain for the manufacturer to create this appeal for the consumer. It's all driven by profit and money."

The terminology many Americans use to describe their food doesn't help the situation either, she adds.

"We tend to say, 'it was big,' or 'it was a bargain,' because here, size is everything, and it's gotten out of control. But in Europe, for example, these kinds of foods don't sell because people don't want them. You never see a super-size option in European fast-food chains."

Contributing Editor Lauren Kramer lives in British Columbia