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Survey: Restaurants dishing out extra-large portions

By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

BOSTON — Most restaurant chefs are dishing out portions that are two to four times bigger than the government's recommended serving sizes.

They know these large amounts are supersizing their diners, but they believe customers expect big platefuls of food when eating out, according to a survey of 300 chefs presented here Saturday at the annual meeting of the Obesity Society.

A typical restaurant meal has at least 60% more calories than the average meal made at home, according to the NPD Group, a market research firm. And Americans purchased 209 meals a person from restaurants last year, both eating at restaurants and buying takeout, NPD says.

Portions served at restaurants have steadily increased since the 1970s in tandem with the rise in obesity rates, says Barbara Rolls, a nutrition professor at Pennsylvania State University.

Researchers at Pennsylvania State University and Clemson University in South Carolina surveyed chefs at several national culinary meetings. Many were executive chefs with degrees in culinary arts. A third worked in elegant restaurants; others in more casual eateries, company cafeterias and fast food places.

Almost all believe that the amount of food served in restaurants influences how much people eat and that big portions are hard on people watching their weight.

Overall, 60% of chefs serve steaks that are 12 ounces or larger. A serving of cooked meat is three ounces, according to the government's dietary guidelines. Most dish up one to two cups of pasta with a meal; a serving is half cup. When it comes to vegetables such as steamed broccoli, chefs are closer to a serving with 1/2 cup.

"Not everybody is a plate cleaner, but as the size of the steak increases, you are probably going to eat more," says Julie Flood, a Penn State doctoral student.

The survey also shows that veteran chefs tend to serve smaller portions, and younger chefs dish larger ones. One possible reason: "The older chefs were trained a couple of decades ago when portions were smaller," Flood says. "The younger ones grew up at a time when the cultural norms were bigger servings."

Other findings:

76% of chefs say their portions are "regular" sized; only 17% described them as large or extra large.

58% say if customers are served a huge amount of food, it's the diners' responsibility to eat the appropriate amount.

86% say customers would notice if the restaurant decreased portions by 25%.

About 60% say customers would not notice 10% to 15% decrease in portion size.

A few years ago, **Lisa Young**, a nutrition professor at New York University, measured food in restaurants and found that portions were far larger than the recommended servings. "Now that we are in agreement, we need to figure out ways to scale back.

"Portions didn't get this big overnight so we need to scale back slowly — 10% to 15% at a time would be progress. And we need to change customer expectations," says **Young**, author of ***The Portion Teller***.

Kurt Hankins, vice president of menu development for Applebee's, the nation's biggest casual dining chain, says portion sizes are determined by asking guests to rate meals for their size as well value and taste. "A simple portion reduction for no apparent reason would not be well accepted."

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