

6 Tips for Eating Healthy While Dining Out

If you're one of the many Americans who has resolved to lose weight and become fitter and healthier in 2015, then I'd be willing to bet that "eating out less" is also one of your New Year's goals, and for good reason. Studies have shown that we are much more likely to eat poorly at restaurants than at home.

Eating in groups, from plates even Goliath would have found oversized, before endless breadbaskets and tempting bowls of chips, all under dim lighting all add up to excessive caloric consumption, not to mention that sickening sensation of guilt (maybe mixed with a little indigestion, too) that lingers long after your last sip of soda or spoonful of dessert.

After a few dietary blunders while dining out, one might come to the conclusion that restaurants should be off limits entirely, or perhaps reserved for super-special occasions, such as round-numbered birthdays and golden anniversaries.

"My diet was going well all day, but then I had a crazy day, stayed late at work, and only had enough time to grab (insert fast food chain here) for lunch. And that was a train wreck, needless to say; I mean, it is fast food, after all."

"My husband wanted to surprise me with a midweek dinner at (insert favorite steakhouse here). I had no choice but to throw healthy eating out the window. It's just the way it goes."

I have been hearing the above two statements repeated over and over again—with slight variations, of course—for years now. There seems to be a common belief among the health-minded community that if you're going to a restaurant, you might as well go whole hog and eat like, well, a hog, because eating

well outside the home is, purportedly, a near Herculean task. But this simply isn't true. Below, I'm going to give you six tips on how to stay on track when eating out.

1. Consider your options. When given the choice as to which restaurant to go to, try to think of ones that you know offer healthy items, for instance, fresh salads, steamed veggies, and grilled or baked—not fried!—meat or fish. Personally, I'm a fan of steakhouses, seafood restaurants, Japanese and Mediterranean establishments, even breakfasts joints, where I know good protein sources and healthy, satisfying fats await! And remember, even fast food restaurants offer healthy options these days, so don't resign yourself to chicken nuggets or a Big Mac if fast food's your only option!

2. Do your research. OK, now that you've made your selection, it's time—if you have time, that is—to scout the menu. Before you leave, or on your way to the restaurant, Google it and pick out the appetizers and entrées that interest you most. Seeing that that the burger you want boasts 850 calories or that the calamari has 300 (per serving!) may convince you to change your mind and order lighter fare instead. And if you must have the burger (We all need a good burger once in a while!), have in mind which ingredients you can ask the server to 86, such as bacon, cheddar cheese or mayo.

If you don't have time to look up the nutrition info, read the menu when you arrive, pick out what appears to be both healthy and appetizing, then ask yourself if you would prepare this for yourself at home. If the answer is yes, order it as is. If the answer is no, then think of ways it can be altered to suit your preferences (lettuce wrap instead of a bread bun, for example, or a side salad instead of French fries). Most restaurants are more than happy to accommodate all kinds of dietary needs, including your need to lead a healthy lifestyle! Don't be afraid to speak up.

3. Learn the language. A few words to be wary of when reading

the restaurant menu:

Alfredo: This is a pasta sauce made with butter, cream, garlic (excellent and healthy by itself, I should mention) and Parmesan cheese.

Au Gratin: This means the dish contains breadcrumbs and melted cheese (the name sounds fancy, but it doesn't mean healthy).

Battered: This item has been coated in batter, and then deep-fried.

Bisque: a rich soup made with cream

Crispy: It most often means "fried in oil," which equals fattening and full of sodium.

Crunchy: Unless it's referring to vegetables, this adjective is synonymous with "crispy."

Pan-fried: Restaurants typically pan fry their food with oils commonly used for commercial frying, such as hydrogenated vegetable oils, or canola, neither of which is recommended by most nutritionists today. Moreover, the oil is often reused (yuck!). Pan-frying can be done healthily if the right ingredients, right fat and right temperature are used.

Rémoulade: a mayonnaise-based salad or seafood dressing made with hard-boiled egg yolks, oil and vinegar, and a host of other items, some good some not so good

Smothered: Chances are good that whatever is "smothering" this dish isn't good for you!

Tempura: A Japanese way of saying "battered and deep-fried"

4. Mind your meat. If you're craving a steak but also want to keep the calories and fat content of your meal low, choose a lean cut (The USDA defines a lean cut of beef as a serving [about 100 grams] that contains less than: 10 grams total fat,

4.5 grams saturated fat, 95 milligrams cholesterol). Beef cuts with “loin” or “round” in the name (top round, round tip, top sirloin, bottom round, top loin and tenderloin) are great choices.

If you’re more of a chicken person (in meat preference only, not disposition), nix the skin to save yourself 8 grams of fat. Also, opt for chicken breasts over drumsticks and wings for less calories, cholesterol, sodium and fat.

5. Start off smart. Lest you be tempted to dip your hand into the breadbasket or partake of crispy, battered, crunchy appetizers (see No. 3), order a broth-based soup or salad (no croutons with a vinaigrette dressing on the side) to arrive before your entrée. This will keep your mouth busy and simultaneously fill your stomach with healthy, hunger-squelching nutrients.

When it comes to beverages, opt for water or unsweetened tea. One soda will set you back at least 90 calories, and the sugar-free versions are also enemies of your waistline as fake sweeteners trigger insulin, which sends your body into fat storage mode, leading to weight gain. If you order wine, consider that your dessert—one 5-ounce serving contains 125 calories. And I recommend red wine over white for its antioxidant content, namely heart-healthy polyphenols.

6. Finish strong. You did your research, started off smart with a healthy appetizer, ordered your meal just the way you wanted it. Now it’s time to finish strong as that dessert menu—or, heaven forbid, a display tray—comes your way.

My first piece of advice is to ask your server to forgo bringing the dessert menu altogether (out of sight, out of mind!). But if you want to end your meal on a sweet note, here are a few suggestions on how to indulge wisely:

- Instead of baked treats, like brownies or cookies, order angel food cake. It’s often lower in fat and calories

and is even topped with fruit! It is also usually topped with cream, so kindly ask your server to leave that off.

- Don't scream for ice cream. Scream for sorbet, sherbet or low-fat frozen yogurt instead! To break it down for you, one cup of ice cream generally has around 270 calories, while one cup of sorbet has 180. Frozen yogurt, while low in fat, still has quite a lot of sugar and calories, around 215, to be exact.
- Fruit desserts, like fresh berries drizzled with honey or a parfait, are generally low in calories and fat. Plus, they're loaded with vitamins and fiber!
- Last but not least, share! Ask a friend if he or she would like to split a dessert with you to cut your calories in half and prevent you from looking down at a half-eaten bowl of sorbet and feeling compelled to "clean your plate!" as my mother used to say.

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