

# The 30 Pound Club

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## Restaurant Calorie Counts

If you live in California, New York City, or several other locations around the country, you find the calorie counts of foods right on the menus. It's a good attempt at trying to teach people about calorie counts in foods, and there's some talk that this should be done nationwide, but how accurate are those numbers?

Researchers chose 42 chain restaurants in Massachusetts, Arkansas, and Indiana; seven sit-down restaurants and seven fast-food restaurants in each area. Then they randomly selected meals from each restaurant; in the case of sit-down restaurants, they bought an entrée and the typical sides that went with it. All foods were analyzed for caloric content. The calories from each food were compared to what the restaurants had put on their nutritional guides. Here are a few observations:

The fast-food restaurants were fairly close to stated calories on average—about 40 calories above what was stated.

The entrées in sit-down restaurants were about 50 calories less than reported while the sides were about 60 calories over.

Sometimes, using the means washes out some of the findings. Plotting the calories in the entrées against the errors above and below what was reported, the higher the number of calories in an entrée, the greater the error below the amount reported in the nutritional guides. One entrée was listed as close to 2,000 calories but as prepared was about 1,400 calories. But those that were closer to 600 calories were often within 50 calories.

Plotting the calories in the sides the exact same way as the entrées, most were very close but several that were listed as having 500 calories actually had between 800 to 1,000 calories.

Why the discrepancies? And why might fast-foods be closer to reported values? Researchers reasoned that most fast foods are manufactured elsewhere but assembled in the restaurant, usually according to rules governing the amount of each ingredient. Condiments and sauces that are added are very precise because the profit margin is lower. In sit-down restaurants, chefs have more control over the product and the measurements are not as regulated, with the exception of measuring the amount of the protein—often the most expensive part of the meal. But with side dishes, especially those that are deep-fat-fried, even an extra ounce of two of a high-fat sauce or dressing can make a big difference in calories, let alone an overly generous chef.

So what's the message for us—eat at fast-food restaurants if we eat out? No, choose your side dishes well. Ask for dressings on the side. Choose the grilled vegetables instead of creamed spinach or plain baked potato with sour cream instead of a loaded baked potato. If the preparer is generous with the cheese, bacon, and butter, that 200-calorie baked potato can end up at 800 calories. This is the reason I always recommend that you weigh your foods during preparation and assembly when you cook at home; that's the only way you'll really know how many calories you're eating.

One and Done.

What are you prepared to do today?

***Dr. Chet***



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