

HEALTHY FLAVORS

KEEPIN' IT

When it comes to healthful menus, more options and fewer messages raise awareness

Light



No wonder so many people are confused. On the one hand, you've got consumer-health groups threatening lawsuits against chains for using certain ingredients; on the other you have consumers staying away from the side-of-fruit option. In this corner, you've got customers demanding reduced-fat, gluten-free and low-carb menu items; over there is that 1,410-calorie double cheeseburger that's so popular.

In the wake of well-publicized missteps made by chains in the name of consumer health, many operators are taking a more low-key and practical approach. They're making lighter options and nutritional information available, while avoiding hitting guests over the head with a "message." You might call it the menu-transparency strategy, wherein patrons can see through the offerings and find the items that suit their needs.

The Cheesecake Factory, for instance, long known for big portions, has recently begun testing a smaller-portion option of some of its most popular dishes. Sodexho's tremendously successful "Your Health, Your Way" program allows business and institutional accounts to tailor their offerings to employee demand.

"People are always going to want hamburgers and french fries, no matter what the FDA says," says Brooks Broadhurst, vice president of product development, purchasing and distribution for Pittsburgh-based Eat'n Park Hospitality Group, whose holdings include the Eat'n Park family-dining chain. "Others are going to watch their diets and nutrition seriously. You can't push healthy food down people's throats, because people don't necessarily want it. But people who do want it should be able to find it on the menu."

Eat'n Park takes a "landscape view" by downplaying any overt health messages while making healthy options — and information — available.

"We have tremendous visibility, and we can help educate people," says Broadhurst, "but that can't be our only purpose."

The company offers low-carb options as well as gluten-free items and "Eat'n Smart" selections with fewer calories, less cholesterol and lower fat content, but it keeps the menu rhetoric light in favor of letting customers decide for themselves. Last fall, it also took the major step of changing its fryer oil to trans-fat-free canola oil, after much debate and testing.

In addition to using the oil as a frying medium, the chain also uses it to cook eggs and to make its oil-and-vinegar dressing. Meanwhile, the company's fries, provolone sticks, hash browns and onion rings have been transitioned into zero-gram-trans-fat production by Lisle, Ill.-based supplier McCain Foods USA, which has made a major commitment to the health and wellness movement with many of its most popular product lines.

"Our customers are still eating french fries, but we're helping them reduce their intake of both saturated fat and trans fats," says Broadhurst. "It's a delicate balance. You don't want to call attention to health issues, but people should be able to have the choice."

Broadhurst notes that the switch was "a long, arduous testing process, because we didn't want our customers to notice. And they don't." ☺

Trans-fat-free oils and fryer-ready products are part of a lighter, more transparent approach to healthful menus.

