

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



Will posting nutritional information on menus make consumers lose their appetite?

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Some react in horror.

Others ignore them.

Some read them, order what they want and feel guilty.

Reactions of local customers to a new federal law requiring chain restaurants to post calorie counts on their menus varied, but the consensus of those queried by the News-Press during an informal poll seems to be it's a good idea whether they choose to pay attention or ignore them.

Among the latter were Renee and Kenneth Wise of Goleta, who had just finished two Mini Meals at McDonald's on Fairview Avenue in Goleta.

"We order what we want," said Mrs. Wise, 82.

"When you get to be a certain age, most people don't care about calories," said Mr. Wise, 93, adding that he and his wife eat at the fast-food restaurant about twice a month, usually ordering regular cheeseburgers, without french fries, and regular Cokes, not diet.

Both think it's a good idea to have the calorie counts on the menus "because if you don't put it on, people will gripe," Mr. Wise said.

It was obvious that Adi Iyer, 22, and Dylan Worster, 20, ignored the calorie counts on the menus at Panda Express in Paseo Nuevo in downtown Santa Barbara. Both were chowing down plates loaded with Chinese cuisine orange chicken and honey walnut shrimp with white rice for Mr. Iyer, who was drinking a regular Dr. Pepper, and orange chicken and white and fried rice for Mr. Worster, whose beverage of choice was Gatorade.

"I eat whatever I want," chuckled Mr. Iyer, a skinny 114 pounds on his 5-foot-10-inch frame. "I know someday it is going to hit me. My brother, Ajash, is 25 and very health conscious. He checks everything because he gains weight quickly."

Like Mr. Worster, who is 6 feet tall and weighs a slim 165 pounds, Mr. Iyer, a native of New Delhi, India, thinks the proposed new federal regulation that requires restaurant chains with 20 or more outlets disclose calorie counts on their food items is a good idea because the information should be available to everyone, and "it's important for some people."

The legislation won't go into effect until there is final approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, possibly by the end of the year, according to Scott Vinson, vice president of the National Council of Chain Restaurants.

Mr. Iyer and Mr. Worster are Santa Barbara City College students who deal with food in their part-time jobs.

"I work at an ice cream shop where calorie counts are posted, and customers are shocked when they see that one of the sundaes has 1,300 calories. Some of them change their minds and order sorbets or sinless ice cream made with Splenda, a sugar substitute," said Mr. Worster, who is from Sacramento. "I figure if you come to get ice cream, you have to expect to have calories."

Besides being a City College student and music producer, Mr. Iyer works in the campus cafeteria and observes that among the hundreds of students who eat there, "most choose whatever they want. About 10 are concerned about weight, and all of them are women."

Susanne Henke, 22, who had just arrived from Paderborn, Germany, to enroll at UCSB with her friend, Gereon Deppe, 22, can relate. They were checking their laptop for apartment rentals while sipping regular Cokes at a McDonald's in Goleta.

Both said they eat at McDonald's about once a month in Germany and were wondering about the new menu labeling here.

"I would definitely pay attention to the calorie counts. If I saw that the Chocolate Triple Thick Shake had 580 calories, I would never buy it," said Ms. Henke. (It does.)

So, she thinks the new law is a good idea?

"Of course! People don't know what they are eating and how many calories are in the food," she said.

Peggy Taylor, 24, agrees. She was eating lunch at the same McDonald's with her brother, Paul Taylor, 31, and David Little, 28, all employees at a nearby electronics company.

"It's a useful tool for people watching their weight but don't have time to make food at home," said Ms. Taylor, whose order included Chicken McNuggets and a diet Dr. Pepper. "Even if the count doesn't affect what you order, it can make a difference in how much you order. For example, the three of us split a large order of fries."

Mr. Little, who was having iced tea with his Premium Grilled Chicken Classic Sandwich, likes the idea of posting calorie counts because it "makes people aware of how much they are eating even though it may not affect their choices."

The new law gets a thumbs up from Mr. Taylor, who was enjoying Chicken McNuggets, because "it's up to customers to make healthful decisions and take responsibility for what they eat. No longer can fast-food restaurants be blamed for the increase in obesity in this country."

Taking that responsibility seriously were Carolyn Sines, 63, and Veronica Loza, 29, who talked to the News-Press in the parking lot at Jack in the Box on upper State Street.

Ms. Sines was enjoying a Hamburger Deluxe with Cheese and Chocolate Ice Cream Shake in the driver's seat of her car during a late lunch hour from her job at a local medical clinic.

Asked if she knew how many calories were in the cheeseburger, Ms. Sines answered, "I think it was 400 unfortunately. (Close it's 421.) The milkshake, I didn't even look. Seeing how many calories there are definitely makes a difference in my choice. Some of the bigger hamburgers are 800 or 900 calories, and I don't order them. I'm trying to be more careful."

Ms. Loza and her daughters, Chloe, 7, and Lexi, 6, had just finished eating and were killing time in the car while waiting to pick up 9-year-old son Gabe from an after-school program at Monte Vista Elementary School.

Their choices included a Kid's Meal (cheeseburger, small fries and Sprite) for Ms. Loza, a Chicken Sandwich and water for Chloe and two tacos for Lexi.

"I definitely check the calories and portion size for me and my children. Food has so many hidden ingredients that can sabotage a diet," said Ms. Loza, who has lost 150 pounds since she had gastric bypass surgery in February 2006. She is now studying to be a medical assistant at SBCC.

Candi Corbani, 66, co-founder of Santa Barbara Channels, and Christopher Story VI, 85, conductor of the West Coast Symphony, shared a Bacon & Cheddar Stuffed Crepe while attending a luncheon meeting of the Downtown Optimist Club at the IHOP Restaurant at the corner of State and Valerio streets.

Ms. Corbani, who has kept a 60-pound weight loss off for 25 years, said she is quite conscious of calorie counts.

"I don't want to consume empty calories. When I saw how many calories there were in a McDonald's smoothie, I didn't order one," she said.

Mr. Story thinks menu labeling is a good idea.

"But I don't bother checking calories. I play tennis three afternoons a week, and sometimes, I eat a late breakfast, skip lunch and have an early dinner."

THE MEAT OF IT

Almost a year ago to the day, on March 23, 2010, President Barack Obama signed the health care reform bill; and among its requirements is that restaurant chains with 20 or more outlets disclose calorie counts on their menus and drive-through signs and supply information on how many calories a healthy person should eat in a day.

The legislation also requires labels on food items in vending machines.

Scott Vinson, vice president of the National Council of Chain Restaurants, pointed out, however, that the legislation won't go into effect until there is final approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

"The statute requires the FDA to write regulations, which it is working on now. As a matter of fact, the agency has to submit proposed guidelines by Wednesday," he said during a phone interview from his office in Washington, D.C. "These proposed regulations will be open for public comment, usually from 60 to 90 days, and afterward, the FDA will review them and make changes. We're hoping for the final legislation by the end of the year."

The NCCR is wholeheartedly in favor of the new law, according to Mr. Vinson.

"We went to Congress three years to get it included in legislation. We favor national regulation and have been working with the FDA to come up with a solution so consumers can access the information quickly," he said. "The way things are going, I think consumers are going to demand the nutrition information, whether dining at single restaurants or those that are part of chains."

Even though the new legislation hasn't been finalized, some chains have begun posting the information because they are in jurisdictions where there is a requirement already places like New York City and Montgomery County, Md., according to Mr. Vinson.

"They made the decision to include all the restaurants across the country rather than change their menus again when the new federal law goes into effect," he said. "Others want to provide more information in response to consumer demand. Our consumers vote with their feet, which is why our industry is constantly innovating."

Independent restaurant owners contemplating menu labeling would be wise to check with Jay Ferro, owner of Silvergreens in Isla Vista and downtown Santa Barbara. He is among numerous eateries that have started providing the information voluntarily.

Nutrition information about calories and grams of protein, fat and fiber for each item is provided on the receipts given to the customers with their orders along with "Did You Know?" tips like "If you're watching your diet, try a side Caesar salad instead of fries and save 253 calories and 21g of fat!"

"We started this with our first Silvergreens in Isla Vista in 2006. It was our testing ground. We wondered how it would affect consumer choices," said Mr. Ferro from his office in Santa Barbara. "The results were fantastic. People were yearning for information about what they were eating."

According to Brian Rocha, general manager of the downtown restaurant, "There's definitely been an increase in substitution for crispy chicken in salads and customers subtracting mayo from sandwiches."

No one is forced to read the information, Mr. Ferro said. "If they don't want to read it, they can throw away the receipt. The important thing is to get the information out to educate people, so they can make better choices."

He admitted that when he first tried the concept in Isla Vista, there was concern about the impact on sales.

"There was a definite impact in a positive way," said Mr. Ferro. "Customers really liked it."

The customer response from more than 1,000 surveys was extremely positive after the practice was started at Silvergreens Isla Vista in 2006, according to Mr. Ferro.

"It was obvious that the vast majority of our customers (over 90 percent) either 'liked or loved the receipt,' and approximately half said the receipt could make them come more often ... Subsequently, we were able to track sales trends. Knowing that the receipt was the only major change we made to the restaurant at that time, when sales jumped 20 percent immediately, it was obvious that this was something our customers did want to have," he wrote in a follow-up e-mail.

"We saw our existing customers come back more often as well as new customers walk through the door. I was obviously glad to find out that for the overwhelming majority of our customers, it was a huge positive, and they responded with Silvergreens IV location growing an average of 18 percent a year in sales for five straight years," Mr. Ferro wrote.

David Peterson, owner of six McDonald's restaurants in Santa Barbara and Goleta, didn't wait to find out what the guidelines will be for the new federal law requiring fast-food restaurants to display calorie counts on their menus.

"I put the information up as soon as possible ... right after the first of the year. I'm passionate about health and nutrition. I want McDonald's to be part of the solution, not the problem," said Mr. Peterson, who talked to the News-Press after a meeting with his staff at the Fairview Avenue location.

Mr. Peterson said he has noticed no difference in sales because of the caloric data.

"I don't think it's making a significant change in people's decisions. Most customers know what they want to order when they come into McDonald's," he said. "They don't pay attention to the menu boards, with or without the calorie counts."

Nutritional numbers are prominently displayed on the drive-through boards and in the stores above the service area for customers to read as they place their orders.

Information about calories, total fat, saturated fat, transfat, cholesterol, carbohydrates, dietary fiber, sugar and protein is also printed on the paper placemats that are placed on trays.

The News-Press contacted several other chains for comment, but the calls were not returned by press time.

For Mr. Peterson, it's all about making choices. Instead of ordering Big Macs, customers can select oatmeal, salads or grilled chicken sandwiches.

"I have an extremely healthy family my wife is a former record-holder swimmer, my daughter, Whitney, was on the tennis team at USC, my son, Parker, plays water polo at Pepperdine University and (my daughter) Lakey is one of the top women surfers in the world. All of us eat at McDonald's. You can eat french fries if you do the work. Calories in, calories out. It's all about choice."

As part of his passion for fitness, Mr. Peterson has hired Erica Lilly, a personal trainer, to help his store managers. Twice a week, the group, including the boss, work out at the Santa Barbara City College track stadium.

Asked if he thinks menu labeling will have an impact on the obesity problem in the United States, Mr. Peterson said, "I really don't know if there will be a dramatic change. What it comes down to is good old-fashioned parenting. Everyone is looking for someone else to blame."

Marilyn McMahan