



11 Ways to Lighten Up Any Restaurant Meal *Eat Healthy--Anywhere!*

-- By Sarah Haan, Registered Dietitian -- Spark People

Going out to eat can be fun, easy and a wonderful way to celebrate an achievement or catch up with friends. But do you find yourself getting anxious just thinking about dining out knowing how many dishes are loaded with calories? Although your woes are well-founded (some restaurants cram as many as 1,800 calories into one entrée), there are ways to beat the system!

Take a step back from ordering what "sounds good" and make a smart (and still delicious!) choice when dining out. Use these tips to help you choose something that is tasty, nutritious *and* comes in at a more appropriate calorie level.

1. **Ask questions.** The biggest factor in successful restaurant ordering is asking questions. The server is there to help, so don't be afraid to tap into his or her knowledge. Asking for clarification is one area where many of us falter. Whether it's to preserve integrity or save time, ditching a request to explain what an unknown term means could lead to a poor meal choice (either in taste or nutrient quality). So when no one at your table can define broasted, carpaccio, or roulade, ask!
2. **Don't be shy.** One of the biggest reasons restaurant-goers give for not ordering exactly what they want is that they didn't want to "be a pest" or something of that nature. The saying, "those that ask, receive" is true when ordering dinner! The person prepping salads will only put your dressing on the side if you ask. If you do feel uncomfortable making requests, start small. Even asking for water with or without lemon is going to set you on the right path to assertive ordering. If you need more motivation, remind yourself that you are a paying customer and deserve to have a reasonable amount of choice in your meal.
3. **Decode the menu.** Know which culinary words are a "go" and which are a "no" when it comes to healthy ordering. Some culinary practices add much more fat, salt, and/or sugar to achieve the effect. Stick to menu descriptors like broiled, baked, marinated, steamed, and vinaigrette; methods like these are likely to be lower in saturated fat, high in good fats, and can be lower in calories overall. Check out [this article](#) for a complete list of words to watch for when scanning a menu.
4. **Replace the side.** Many standard side items are fried, refined carbohydrates. Replace items like fries, onion rings or potato chips with whole grain or high fiber choices such as brown rice, steamed vegetables, or a plain baked potato. If there is an up charge, it's up to you to decide if it's worth \$1.99 to save hundreds of calories and get extra fiber, vitamins and minerals to switch from fries to veggies.
5. **Hold the butter.** Restaurants sneak butter into many unexpected places without spelling it out on the menu. Take initiative and ask if you suspect extra butter is used in preparing the meal you're considering. Some common spots that butter turns up is on the bread (sometimes both sides) of grilled sandwiches, melted and coated onto vegetables, or added in with rice. Sometimes, holding the butter is not an option since many restaurants will batch cook dishes, but it's definitely worth asking so you know exactly what you're ordering.
6. **Change the size.** There are a few ways you can control the portion size of your meal. Some restaurants offer half portions, or small plates right off the bat, but if it's not advertised, ask. The venue you are visiting may be willing to split your plate, sell you half portions, or at least place half of your meal in a to-go container to take with you when you leave. Eating proper portions is half the battle when it comes to achieving calorie balance.
7. **Slow down.** The ambiance of restaurants can be distracting, relaxing, grounds for a long meal, or all three. This type of environment can cause us to overeat or eat mindlessly. Take note of this effect, and consciously slow your eating and drinking. Sit back between bites, enjoy the conversation, and pay attention to how much of your meal you're consuming, as well as whether or not you're full.
8. **Start smart.** Appetizers can pack in more than 500 calories, easily. For a "pre-meal snack," that's closing in on most of our calorie goals for the meal before it even starts. If you are ordering an appetizer, stick to something light in calories like grilled shrimp or high in nutrients like steamed edamame. If the venue has fried shrimp on the menu, see if you can order it grilled. If there is not an optimal appetizer to choose, stick to a small salad with veggies and vinaigrette, a broth-based soup or water/unsweetened tea until your meal comes.
9. **Behave with beverages.** Drinks, both non-alcoholic and alcoholic, can pack in many calories during a meal, especially if the server keeps topping off your soda or you're pouring from a carafe of wine. Whatever you



choose to sip on, be sure to take the liquid calories and nutrients (or lack thereof) into account when choosing your meal. To really get the lowdown on the health of beverages, turn to this [healthy beverage guide](#).

10. **Start substituting.** Yes, it's OK to substitute items on a menu! See tip #2 and make that switch. If a menu item sounds good, but you find yourself thinking "I would use a lighter sauce, like marinara, instead of alfredo," try it! Some great swaps to make that increase nutrients, decrease calories, or both are:

- Asking for beans in place of meat
- Ordering double veggies instead of choosing meat in a pasta dish or stir fry
- Switching to whole grain bread, rice, tortillas or chips if possible
- Asking for slivered almonds, chopped walnuts or extra veggies instead of cheese on a salad
- Replacing a cream sauce with a broth or tomato-based sauce

11. **Nix the extras.** Extras can add on a quick 100 calories without us even thinking or blinking! Get into the habit of saying a polite "no thank you" when asked if you want extra cheese, Parmesan cheese on salad or pasta, or bread prior to your meal. Personal-size desserts are also in this category. Although they're small, trendy and cute, then can still add up to 100 calories or more. After a meal that is likely over the 400-600 calorie mark, 100 extra calories "here and there" definitely add up.