

Healthy Fast Food

Does it really exist or is it just slick marketing?

I admit it. I'm hooked on sodas. And Del Taco's Chicken Works Burrito. But it wasn't always like this. For many years, I was a vegetarian and complete health food head, eating only the finest, unprocessed, organic foodstuffs. I faltered when I started dating my now-husband, a fast-food connoisseur who slowly re-introduced me to the joys of Big Macs, Whoppers and KFC's Popcorn Chicken.

Today, I'm a junk-food junkie like most of America. And it shows. I've gained 50 pounds since I put meat, processed foods and fast foods back into my once-stellar diet. At least once a week, I think about going back to the good old days of soy milk and tofu, but I always rationalize it away, claiming that I do not have enough time or patience to make separate meals.

On busy days, when we opt for a fast-food meal instead of cooking at home, I usually try to order the healthiest item on the menu and forego the fries. It was a challenge that I was used to losing. Until now.

On the heels of both government and public pressure, most fast-food restaurants have recently introduced "healthy" menu items. And although I am skeptical of claims made by the same companies that advertise burgers, fries and sodas to kids on Saturday mornings, even I am beginning to see some real changes in the industry. Is there really such a thing as healthy fast food these days, or is it just another slick marketing gimmick?

Modifying menus

"[Healthy fast food] exists and it's getting better," says Diane Keddy, MSRD, a Newport Beach-based dietician and nutrition counselor. She believes that two issues have converged in the American conscience to bring about such needed change in restaurant menu offerings—greater media attention about obesity and its link to disease, and the low-carbohydrate diet craze.

"People are now more aware about what unhealthy eating is doing to their health and overall well-being," says Keddy, who is not a proponent of fad diets such as reducing carbohydrate intake, but realizes the educational impact of media coverage of such diets.

For healthy eating at fast-food restaurants, Keddy recommends that you skip the beef and eat "burgers," sandwiches, wraps and salads made only with freshly grilled chicken. "It's also best to order the creamy sauces, mayonnaise and dressings on the side so you can control the portion," she suggests.

And French fries are a definite no-no. "I recommend that my clients get a healthy entrée and then order a side salad or vegetable," Keddy says. "Fries should be consumed as a treat only about once every three-to-four weeks."

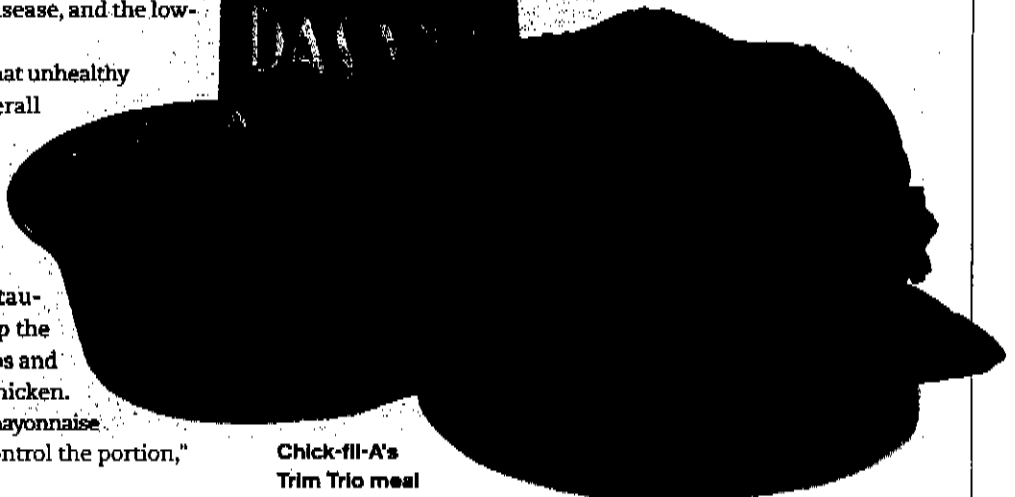
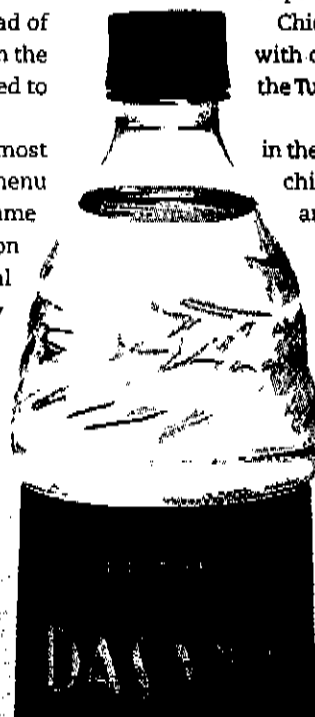
She believes that McDonald's, once the deep-fry king of fast food, now has some of the healthiest menu choices around. But for Keddy, El Pollo Loco and other "Fresh Mex" restaurants such as Baja Fresh, La Salsa and Rubio's have the most options for a healthy body. "Because they don't offer any deep-fried products, I don't even consider it fast food," she says.

Keddy also likes the low-fat sandwich choices at Subway and Togo's, as long as you order it on wheat bread and substitute baked chips for any fried potato product.

Chick-fil-A, an Atlanta-based fast-food chain with one Orange County restaurant located in the Tustin Marketplace, has recently introduced what may be the healthiest combo meal in the nation. Its Trim Trio meal features a grilled chicken sandwich on a wheat bun without any condiments, a fresh fruit cup and bottled water.

At only 330 calories, the meal has less than four fat grams and zero grams of trans fat. And although it was hard to drink water instead of my usual Diet Coke on a recent visit to Chick-fil-A, I found the chicken sandwich (even without any condiments) to be flavorful and the fruit was impressively fresh.

Does all of this good-for-you food sound way too good to be true? It is. "You
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Chick-fil-A's Trim Trio meal

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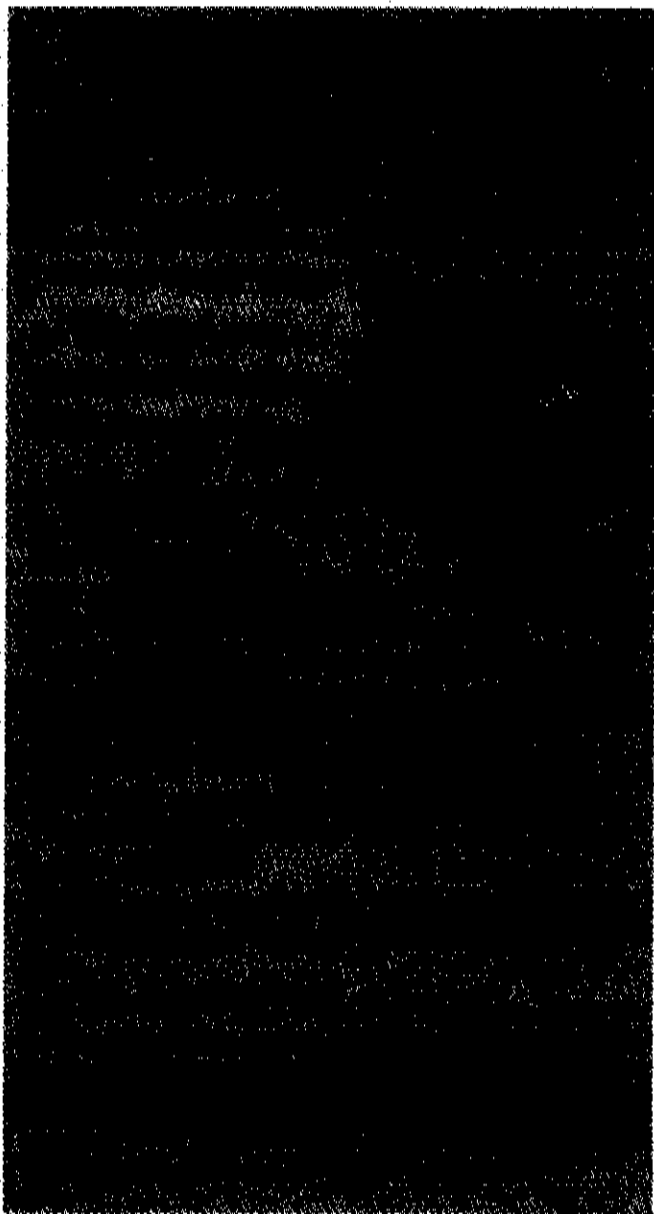
HEALTH/FITNESS

are getting too much salt from a meal at any restaurant," says Keddy, who is particularly concerned about people with hypertension. "All restaurant food is prepared with salt and even salad dressing is high in sodium."

This May, the documentary film "Super Size Me" pointed out the problem of portion control. In a devastating critique of traditional fast food, filmmaker Morgan Spurlock puts his body on the line in the film, and for 30 days eats nothing but McDonald's for breakfast, lunch and dinner. During the experiment, Spurlock is monitored by various doctors who note that he gains 25 pounds, becomes clinically depressed, loses his sex drive and has a malfunctioning liver. Acting even before the movie was released, McDonald's discontinued its Super Size menu to avoid public outrage.

Low carb fact and fiction
 If you watch just an hour or so of television today, you

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are bound to see at least one commercial from a fast-food chain offering a "low carb" menu item. Taking its cue from the country's obsession with the Atkins and South Beach diets, which recommend reducing carbohydrate intake, the fast food industry finally caved into public pressure.

But are "low carb" products really healthy?

"They are incorrectly labeled as healthy simply because they have the words 'low carb' on them (which may or may not even be true, as there are no dietary standards set by the FDA for these offerings)," says Aliso Viejo-based Melanie Jordan, a nutritionist and author of "Have Your Cheeseburger and Keep Your Health, Too!"

"It has been shown by organizations like the Center for Science in the Public Interest, that some of these offerings can be full of calories and artery-clogging fat from full-fat cheese, bacon and fatty meats," says Jordan.

Fast from your freezer

So you need your food to be fast, but you don't want to sacrifice your health for convenience? Evan's Supper Club (www.evanssupperclub.com) is an option whose time has come. A former chef turned caterer, Evan Lewis created a new way for busy professionals to eat a quick and healthy dinner. "There really is no healthy fast food because of the preservatives," she says.

Lewis, who has worked at such venerable OC institutions as The Cedar Creek Inn and Bistro 201, has her clients "assemble" 10 gourmet meals which can be frozen, and then later cooked in the oven for about an hour and served at

the table with a side salad or vegetable. "I studied nutrition," says Lewis, "and I decided that I would find a way to get healthy meals to busy people."

Meeting several times a month at The Chapleau Restaurant in Laguna Beach, about a dozen people gather in a festive mood to prepare dishes they plan to eat days later such as sea bass with roasted fennel and spicy tomatoes, Cuban chicken with tangy citrus marinade and herb-crusted pork chops with black-eyed peas. Lewis and her staff do all the "prep" work (slicing and dicing) ahead of time so the participants can leisurely assemble the meals in aluminum containers.

"It's awesome and the food is so fresh," says San Juan Capistrano resident Joni Boranian, a mother of four with a high-stress job at the U.S. Treasury Department. "It's brought our family together for dinner. It's a great solution for us."

While sipping a glass of Chardonnay generously donated by Joni and her husband Eric (Evan offers crackers and cheese and her clients bring their own wine), it took me about 30 minutes to put together the vegetable-laden salmon Vera Cruz and a spicy, marinated Jamaican jerk chicken.

Cooked several days later on a busy night, my family thoroughly enjoyed the freshness and delicate flavors of both meals. It was certainly fast, the food was gourmet caliber and, just like the drive-thru, the minimal cleanup made my day. **OCM**

Sheryll Alexander is a lifestyles writer based in Costa Mesa. She is a regular contributor.

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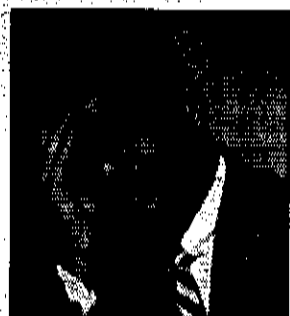
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