



EATING ETHNIC, EATING WELL

By Kate Jackson

America clearly has a love affair with ethnic foods. In any major metropolitan center and increasingly even in smaller towns, diners can choose from an array of restaurants that dish up foreign flavors from around the globe, from the most popular Chinese and Mexican specialties to the more exotic Thai and Indian delicacies. But from a health perspective, ethnic foods have developed something of a bad rap—one that's not entirely deserved.

Sure, that bottomless basket of tortilla chips from your neighborhood Mexican restaurant, the sour cream-smothered tacos from a popular fast-food chain, or the double-cheese enchiladas from the local outlet of a national franchise may blow a couple day's worth of calories in one sitting. Yes, the sweet and sour pork from the local mall's food court may be filled with fat as well as sugar and the General Gao's Chicken from the exclusive restaurant downtown may be loaded with sodium and fat. But there's more to ethnic foods than these nutritional slackers and health-sappers.

All ethnic foods have dishes that are nutritional superstars—nutrient-dense, low-fat, high-fiber, and rich in phytochemicals. The trick to eating well—not merely to satisfy the taste buds but the body's better interests at the same time—is choosing carefully from among the temptations and using the same commonsense guidelines that guide your choices at home and in your own cooking.

Portion Control

The most unhealthy thing about ethnic restaurants—and about dining out in general, say experts—is the supersized attitude about portions. But portions, says Mary “Mickey” Bielamowicz, PhD, MS, RD, LD, CFCS, professor and nutrition specialist, Texas Cooperative Extension, Texas A&M University System, are things people choose themselves from whatever opportunities are presented, so they can be controlled by the diner, even when the restaurant has gone overboard. When clients know and understand what makes a good portion size of a variety of foods, she explains, they can eat foods in any restaurant and maintain their nutritional standards.

On the other hand, Hope Warshaw, a nutrition expert, diabetes educator, and author of *Eat Out, Eat Right: The Guide to Healthier Eating Out*, says, “It’s very difficult to limit portions when you have a large amount of food in front of you.” She recommends that diners limit the amount of food they order and get a doggie bag before they dig in.

Avoidance of High-Fat Foods

Many ethnic foods are high in fat, as are many All-American favorites, but most cuisines offer enough choices so consumers can sidestep the high-fat items and select more healthful choices. Most have vegetarian dishes or vegetable-rice-bean combinations that are typically low in fat, and many offer meals to order—that is, consumers can request that meat or poultry be broiled or baked, rather than fried or sautéed. Bielamowicz is from Texas, where she says, there’s a lot of “chicken fried this and that—a double whammy because they have extra flour that soaks up even more fat to make the outsides crispy.” In all these cases, she says, it’s not the food that’s bad but the manner of preparation. If customers make choices that focus on the method of preparation, they’ll select more wisely, she suggests.

Among the most significant sources of fat are the sauces and dressings for which ethnic dishes are notorious. Most consumers recognize that they’re going to get more fat, especially saturated fat, in cream sauces, observes Libby Mills, MS, RD, LDN, personal trainer, lifestyle coach in private practice in Coventry, Pa., who notes that the fat content of other sauces may be less obvious. Sauces are a trap to watch for, she observes, noting that it’s not always easy to tell when a dish is laden with a fat-rich glaze or sauce. “Sauces in Asian foods, for example, are incredibly deceiving because they’re so well-mixed that they don’t appear oily.” Restaurants, however, are generally willing to accommodate requests to prepare dishes without sauces, and, says Mills, consumers can choose items that are steamed and request sauce on the side. Similarly, salads are a good choice in almost any restaurant, but the dressings may add hundreds of calories and high quantities of fat. Most often, low-fat dressings are available, or dressing can be requested on the side and used sparingly.

Thinking About Food Groups

“What I’d encourage people to do when dining out in ethnic restaurants is to focus on food groups. It’s no different than what they should be practicing for all their meals—looking for ways to take in lots of vegetables and choosing the leaner choices of meat,” says Mills. “That doesn’t mean that you wouldn’t choose lamb, for example, from a Greek or Indian menu, but if you’re a frequent diner and you’re going to eat all sorts of ethnic foods often, you want to look for ways to get chicken breasts as opposed to some of these heavy meats most of the time.”

Planning For Indulgences

There are many healthful choices for frequent patrons of ethnic restaurants, and within reason, there’s no need to give up altogether the less healthful ethnic food favorites, either, says Mills, who suggests that a little planning can help make room for the occasional indulgence. “If you know that tonight you’re going to go out for soul food with your friends, throughout the day you might go light on some of the carbohydrates and fats so you’re not overloading yourself for the day.” Go

ahead and have some, she says, but be mindful of the day’s total calories.

On the Menu

The foods of each culture have their own distinct tastes and nutritional pros and cons, says Mills, who, along with Bielamowicz, offers the following tips that may help your clients distinguish the good from the not-so-good items found on the menus at the more popular ethnic restaurants.

Thai

Mills champions Thai food and can find much in it to recommend in addition to the exotic flavors and unique blend of spices. “There are plenty of dishes with fish and shrimp, tons of vegetables, and not a lot of meat.” Thai chefs, she says, don’t rely on meat to carry the dishes. Instead, she says, it’s all about the flavors and the sauces. Thai dishes, even the desserts, she says, often incorporate fruit—an unusually healthful practice. Given her focus on food groups, Thai food rates highly for Mills because it guarantees a good selection from all the groups.

She offers one caution, however: beware of coconut milk. “When you get the taste of coconut, you’re getting a lot of fat.” On the other hand, cuisines such as these that use more spices that are rich in antioxidants and other anticancer and anti-inflammatory compounds, are healthier, says Laura Pensiero, RD, chef and owner of Gigi Trattoria, Rhinebeck, N.Y., and coauthor of *The Strang Cookbook for Cancer Prevention*.

Chinese and Japanese Foods

While some Chinese, Japanese, and Thai foods are fried or laden in oil, there’s an abundance of healthful choices. Menus often offer items such as meat, seafood, and poultry that’s steamed, roasted, or poached, as well as steamed rice and vegetables. Of concern, however, is the sodium content from the use of sodium glutamate or soy sauce. Restaurants often have low-sodium selections, and consumers can request that their meals be prepared without monosodium glutamate or added salt or soy sauce.

Even the lower-sodium dishes will still have some salt, but individuals trying to cut back on salt can plan ahead, consuming little

sodium for the rest of the day when they're planning to dine in an Asian restaurant. Diners would do well, in addition, says Bielamowicz, to avoid the sweet and sour dishes, which are often deep-fried and loaded with high-fat, high-calorie sauce, and select instead more simple choices such as beef and broccoli or chicken and steamed vegetables.

An emphasis on soy products is a plus, but sometimes soy foods, such as tofu, are prepared with fatty sauces or are deep-fried. When in doubt, ask about preparation methods and choose the simple, low-fat dishes.

Fish, which is popular in both Chinese and Japanese restaurants, is often low in fat and many fish are high in healthful omega-3 fatty acids. Sushi and sashimi, when prepared according to guidelines, are good choices. Less healthful are tempura and other deep-fried foods, as well as sushi rolls with cream cheese.

Mediterranean

Clients who like to eat out frequently and enjoy ethnic foods would do well to add Mediterranean cuisine to their list of favorites. The dishes, says Bielamowicz, are thought to be more healthful, largely because they are typically prepared with olive oil, a monounsaturated fatty acid that does not promote cholesterol production.

In addition, she observes, the menus typically offer a number of fish selections, which are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, as well as a number of high-fiber and vitamin rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

Soul Food

"I was born in Oklahoma where everything was cooked in a cast iron skillet and began with a dollop of bacon grease," says Mills. That's characteristic of many soul foods, which, she adds, are "notorious for using lard or backfats for cooking or seasoning." When dining in a soul food restaurant, be alert to possible sources of such unhealthy fats, for example, corn bread flavored with bacon drippings or butter.

Soul food is also famous for tempting but often high-fat side dishes, such as macaroni and cheese, and for the ubiquitous plates of biscuits and gravy or cornbread on every table. As with other types of foods, says Mills, pay attention to the food groups and try to focus on opportunities for consuming vegetables. Try to substitute

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR RESOURCES...

According to Mary "Mickey" Bielamowicz, PhD, MS, RD, LD, CFCS, professor and nutrition specialist, Texas Cooperative Extension, Texas A&M University System, the American Dietetic Association and the American Diabetes Association offer publications containing tips for eating ethnic foods and exploring new tastes in nutritious ways.

In addition, if you want to arm your clients with a take-along guide to making the right choices every time they eat out, steer them toward *Eat Out, Eat Right: The Guide to Healthier Eating Out* (Surrey Books, 2003) by Hope Warshaw, a nutrition expert and diabetes educator who offers practical tactics for avoiding the worst and choosing the best of the foods of the world.

Warshaw guides readers to sidestep nutritional pitfalls when ordering from restaurants serving, for example, the cuisines of India, Mexico, Italy, China, Thailand, Japan, the Middle East, and, of course, America. If your clients say it's tough to eat healthfully because they're often on the road or seldom cook for themselves, Warshaw shows that it's possible to eat well without wallowing in salt, sugar, cholesterol, and fat.

— KJ

the more fat-laden side orders with sides of extra vegetables, which are generally plentiful in soul food establishments.

Soul food restaurants offer a variety of salads, greens, and vegetable dishes, which are healthful, but watch for the dressings, warns Bielamowicz. Ask for the dressing on the side, she suggests, and then dip only your fork in the dressing before spearing your food. "You'll get the full flavor of the dressing without very much on the greens," she says. Another healthful staple of soul cooking is the sweet potato. Indulge, but avoid the butter, she advises, and you'll have a good and tasty source of fiber. Cornbread is another good source of fiber, but it tends to be high in fat, so once again, eat a small portion and avoid adding butter or jam.

Mexican

The good news about Mexican food is that its staples include beans, rice, corn, avocados, and lean meats. The bad news is that those good foods are often smothered in lard, sour cream, or cheese. According to Mills, when you are eating at mainstream, chain ethnic restaurants, you have to be twice as careful because you're more likely to find health traps.

However, if you're able to find the more traditional or smaller mom-and-pop style restaurant, you're more likely to get some extremely healthful dishes. Rather than just the fast-food favorites, such as burritos, enchiladas, and tacos, you might instead find more healthful items such as posole—a

spicy stew of hominy, lime juice, and some pork or beef. And many of the more regional Mexican dishes contain seafood, which is a plus, says Mills. Bielamowicz suggests avoiding the dishes with a high added-fat content, and choosing instead such items as fajitas, which emphasizes vegetables and lean cuts of beef, chicken, or pork.

Avocados are plentiful on Mexican plates, and while they're high in fat and calories, they're also nutrient rich. Indulge freely in salsas, which are not only low in fat, but loaded with vitamins and phytochemicals. The biggest trap and temptation for many when dining at a Mexican restaurant is the salsa's traditional companion—those hot, salty, greasy tortilla chips served in never-ending baskets.

"I tell people that four of those chips is equal to one slice of bread plus a teaspoon of butter, not to mention the sodium," says Bielamowicz. There's simply no way to make that a good choice. "Another pitfall in Mexican cookery," she says, "is the flour tortilla, which contains lard."

To avoid that fat and gain fiber as well, choose corn tortillas instead, she advises. Rice and bean dishes are also generally good bets, but sometimes the beans are flavored with bacon grease or ham hocks. To be certain, it's best to ask the server how those dishes are prepared.

— Kate Jackson is a staff writer for *Today's Dietitian*.