

FINDING FITNESS : Author tells truth about portion size

JAN GAUGHAN

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A few pages into Lisa Young's *The Portion Teller: Smartsize Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss*, I put down the book and went into the kitchen.

Our everyday dishes are stacked in a cabinet within easy reach, but on the shelf above them sit forgotten odds and ends from past sets inherited or stolen piecemeal from extended family.

I took down a Kennedy-era relic and set it on the counter beside one of my newer dinner plates. The old plate, though it seemed quite serviceable and normal-size on its own, was dwarfed by the newer one, which was at least a third larger in diameter.

Holy moly, it's true. My family's been supersized.

Young, a registered dietitian who's on the New York University faculty — you may have seen her interviewed in the 2004 documentary *Supersize Me* — says this size inflation over the last few decades permeates modern American life, and it's what makes it so very easy to chronically overeat without realizing it. Consider: In 1960, the common portion size for a pasta entree in a restaurant was 1.5 cups; in 2000, it was 3 cups. (That's an entire day's allotment of grain servings alone, in one meal.) Pizzas were 10 inches in diameter in the 1970s. Pizza Hut and Little Caesars, which today offer 16- to 18-inch pizzas, have discontinued the 10-inch pie.

As restaurants and manufacturers have adopted strategies over the years that've brought the cost of producing and shipping food and household goods down, they've also adopted a marketing strategy of enticing the buyer by pointing out that he now gets more value — more stuff — without paying a higher price. Bigger equals better.

We carry that mindset into our own cooking and serving, Young maintains. The new edition of the classic cookbook *The Joy of Cooking* has dessert recipes identical to the originals, she says — except that the new ones make fewer servings than the old ones. For example, a recipe that once made 30 brownies now makes 16, because our

brownies are about twice as big as our grandmothers' were. "People eat in units, this is a fact of human nature," Young writes. "A lot of people would never order a second helping of something — two frozen yogurts, another popcorn bucket, one more order of fries — but have no problem buying a medium of any of these foods (which is usually twice as large as a small) and finishing the whole thing. Presented with two smalls or a medium, they almost always think they're eating less with the medium portion because one serving must be less than ordering a second helping." A typical bran muffin has the same number of grain servings as in 6 \pm 2 round frozen waffles; I can't

I see myself grabbing 6/2 waffles on my way out the door and eating them on the drive to work, but one muffin seems like a reasonable portion. Only it isn't.

A Pennsylvania State University study showed that when given larger food portions, people eat 30 percent to 50 percent more at a sitting than if they are served a smaller plate. "What's even more surprising is that, even though we eat more, we don't feel more full," Young says. "We feel the same as if we had a smaller serving."

So how do we reverse this brainwashing? Counting calories and weighing our portions on scales would help, but Young knows we get tired of that — it's too cerebral, when appetite is so visceral. She proposes that we fight the visual cues we're immersed in with new ones — new images in our minds of what a reasonable portion looks like. There's the familiar deck of cards for a serving of meat, poultry or fish such as salmon or tuna. Young adds a CD for the diameter a waffle should be; a walnut is a serving of peanut butter. A baseball-size portion of pasta provides a third of your daily grain allotment; a capful from a 16-ounce water bottle is a reasonable amount of salad dressing. Even fruits and vegetables have swollen in size in recent years, so she measures fruit and vegetable portions in terms of baseballs and half-baseballs. For flaky fish such as flounder, a portion is checkbook-size. She also offers a set of portion images based on hands, fists and thumb tips. Knowing what a reasonable portion of something is would be pointless, unless you knew how many computer mice and card decks and Altoids boxes you should eat in a day. Young includes detailed information on daily nutrition requirements, based on updated federal guidelines available at www.mypyramid.gov. (Young has her own pyramid, of course; doesn't everyone these days?)

Next time, we'll look at how you could build a sensible diet using Young's images for portion control.

Copy editor Jan Gaughan's column appears every other week. E-mail her at jan_gaughan@adg.ardemgaz.com