

# MODERN MOM

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## Making Healthy Restaurant Choices

by Editors of Prevention magazine with Ann Fittante, MS, RD

At a popular pizza chain, the personal pan pizza with sausage packs 740 calories and 39 grams of fat. And at one major fast-food joint, a triple cheeseburger with everything has 810 calories and 47 grams of fat -- two meals' worth of calories and more fat than most of us should scarf down in an entire day.

The bright spots in this grease-spattered scenario? First, you. Your power as a restaurant patron lies in your order. The waiter, cook, and manager want you to leave happy -- just tell them what you want. Second, more and more fast-food spots, casual dining eateries, and even upscale restaurants offer healthier alternatives on their regular menus.

We believe that a meal away from home should be delicious and enjoyable -- there's no need to order dry chicken breast, have only a glass of water . . . and sulk. The trick? A little preparation so that you can outwit the menu, sidestep temptation, withstand the siren song of enormous portions, and leave the table happy.

### Have it Your Way

Eating out is, in a sense, eating blind. You don't usually have access to nutrition labels, so you don't realize how the cheese, butter, oil, sugar, and oversize portions are adding up. (That focaccia club sandwich? It packs 1,222 calories and 65 grams of fat!) The veggies may arrive dripping with butter and cream. The bread's heavenly, but it's white. That salad that seemed so healthy may have more calories and fat than a cheeseburger, thanks to fried chicken strips and an ocean of dressing.

And then there are the portions. When a pair of New York University nutrition experts weighed and measured the everyday foods served up in Manhattan's delis, bakeries, and sit-down restaurants, their results were amazing: Compared with government-recommended portion sizes, pasta servings were five times heftier, cookies were seven times larger, and muffins weighed three times more. Why you might not notice: Portions have slowly, slowly increased in size over the past 30 to 50 years. "What I found was appalling," says study author **Lisa Young** in her book *Portion Teller: Smartsizes Your Way to Permanent Weight Loss*. "The foods we buy today are often two or three times, even five times, larger than when they were first introduced into the marketplace."

If you suspect that restaurant eating is a minefield, you're not alone. Even chefs have food issues when faced with a yummy menu -- or the temptations cooking in their own kitchens. (If you were constantly surrounded by chocolate lava cake, fettuccine Alfredo, raisin nut bread, and bacon-wrapped filet mignon, what would you do?) "Having lunch at a restaurant is where I can get into trouble," confesses chef Sara Moulton, host of *Cooking Live with Sara Moulton* and *Sara's Secrets on the Food*

Network, cookbook author, and executive chef at *Gourmet* magazine. Who wouldn't find it hard to resist the extras (like foie gras or a six-dessert sampler) that chefs often send to her table?

Yet Moulton stays slim -- and even dropped a few pounds when she was about to start hosting a live television show several years ago. ("The camera really does add 10 pounds," she says.) Her strategy? Don't let yourself get too hungry, especially before a dinner out. "When you're hungry, your resistance to snack on tempting foods plummets," she says. She does splurge a little on weekly dinner dates with her husband. "Knowing I can have some cheese on Friday night helps keep me disciplined the rest of the week," she says. At lunch, Moulton sometimes can't resist eating an entire 714-calorie mozzarella, tomato, and basil sandwich. And yet, she believes in not letting a diet detour derail her successful efforts to maintain a svelte figure. She gets right back on the horse: "On those days, my dinner is a 300-calorie Lean Cuisine."

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How can you achieve -- and maintain -- a lean silhouette while still enjoying a night out at a bistro? These strategies will help.

### **Step 1: Prepare Your Plan of Attack**

It's amazing how much trouble you can get in even before your meal arrives. Take a proactive stance against the unhealthful food assault catapulting in from all sides.

**Spoil your appetite.** Before you leave for dinner, eat something substantial like a bowl of soup, a piece of leftover chicken, a piece of toast with low-fat cheese and leftover vegetables, yogurt with fruit and nuts, a hard-cooked egg, or apple slices sprinkled with cinnamon. Any healthy minimeal will be lower in calories and fat than an over-the-top restaurant appetizer.

**Know where you're going.** Become familiar with the dining guidelines for different kinds of restaurants, and try to picture what you're going to eat before you even walk in the door. Don't let the menu sway you! If you've been to the restaurant before and can resist the temptation, keep the menu closed. Order what you'd like, and let the waiter sort it out. It's your meal -- have it your way.

**Avoid the bread basket.** It's one of the leading causes of overeating at restaurants. Send the basket back -- out of sight is out of mind. If that's unthinkable, take one slice of bread to enjoy with your meal. Bread can tack on an additional 500 calories to your meal's total -- not even including the butter or olive oil that usually accompanies it.

**Limit yourself to one alcoholic drink.** Alcohol, whether in the form of a cocktail, wine, or beer, can weaken your resolve for exercising thoughtful moderation with your food. Plus, it dehydrates you and offers no nutritional benefit. When you go out, limit yourself to just one drink -- or order a bottle of fancy water instead.

Because the body will use the alcohol for energy first (followed by carbohydrates, protein, and fat), when you drink and eat, the excess calories are often stored as fat.

To keep the pounds from piling on, skip higher-fat entrées (such as duck and filet mignon) in favor of lower-fat fare (including white fish, pork, poultry, and venison) when having wine with dinner.

**Drink water.** You've heard this before, but we'll say it again: Drink water before, during, and after every meal, whether you're at a restaurant, at home, or anywhere else.

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## **Step 2: Place Your Order With Confidence**

If you feel intimidated by servers, stop right now. Don't worry that you're holding them up with your questions and requests. Don't feel shy. Running interference between the kitchen and your table is a server's job, and he or she wants to please you. (There's a tip at stake here . . .)

**Be constantly aware of portion sizes.** Trust us: You likely won't need an appetizer *and* an entrée. Some restaurants have been known to serve up to seven times the normal portion for a meal.

Plan to leave food on your plate -- or request that half of your meal be wrapped before it even comes to the table. Why you want to keep the extra food out of sight: In a Pennsylvania State University study, researchers found that all the volunteers who were given extra food on their plates ate it -- without reporting feeling any fuller afterward.

Appetizers are generally more realistic portion sizes. Order your favorite as a meal with a side salad, or order two appetizers -- one that is more vegetable-based.

**Ask, ask, ask.** Is it fried? What kind of sauce comes with it? What sides are served with each dish? Can I get brown rice instead of white?

**Always request sauces and dressings on the side.** You'll realize how little sauce and dressing you really need.

**Don't order something new when you're very hungry.** If you do, you'll likely order too much food, overeat, and regret it later. If you're starving, order a standby that you know is good for you.

**Order plenty of vegetables.** Get a large mixed salad, or order vegetables sautéed in a bit of olive oil or steamed with sauce on the side (so you can lightly dip them in the sauce).

**Sip some broth.** Soup is a good high-volume food that will fill you up. Look for vegetable, broth-based, and bean soups. Avoid cream-based soups and chowders.

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## **Step 3: Finish With a Flourish**

Don't let down your guard after the server scurries off to the kitchen with your order. You'll still need to exercise some caution when your perfectly ordered meal arrives.

**Stay alert.** It's easy to get caught up in an engaging conversation and eat everything on your plate without even thinking about it. After you've finished your allotted amount, have the server wrap up your leftovers. The bonus is that you have tomorrow's lunch (or dinner) already prepared.

**End your meal with refreshing green or herbal tea.** Ginger tea can help with digestion, and green tea is good for your overall health. Many restaurants now offer a variety of exotic teas, so treat yourself to some! Some teas are so fruity that they're a perfect replacement for dessert.

**Order a dessert for the table.** Three bites of the chef's signature chocolate bread pudding with butterscotch sauce won't hurt -- just make sure someone else will finish the rest.

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