

X-Treme eating draws attention to restaurant food choices

By Sara Wyant, Editor, Agri-Pulse

As Americans eat more and more meals away from home, it should not be without access to information about the calories and fat content that restaurants are dishing up. At least that's the perspective from Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA) and House Agricultural Appropriations Subcommittee Chair Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT). **"We must provide the same food labeling information available to consumers at grocery stores – calories and fat content – on the menus at chain restaurants to give consumers the option of selecting healthy options,"** noted Harkin. "Just because consumers are eating away from home does not mean they should not have the same tools available to them at home."

Both Harkin and DeLauro announced plans to re-introduce the Menu Education and Labeling Act (MEAL) which would require fast-food and large chain restaurants to list calories, saturated and trans fat, and sodium content on printed menus, and list only calories for menu boards where space is limited. The measure was introduced in the last two consecutive Congresses.

The MENU announcement coincided with a new Center for Science in the Public (CSPI) study called "X-Treme Eating." The report details the considerable number of calories consumers are eating in one meal---or sometimes just with one appetizer---without likely knowing the difference. "Burgers, pizzas, and quesadillas were never health foods to begin with, but many restaurants are transmogrifying these foods into ever-more harmful new creations, and then keeping you in the dark about what they contain," said Michael F. Jacobson, executive director of CSPI. Some of the "X-Treme Eating" options highlighted in the March issue of CSPI's Nutrition Action Healthletter include:

- Ruby Tuesday's "Colossal Burger." Ruby Tuesday actually became the first big chain to put nutrition information on its menus. Unfortunately it scrapped that initiative, presumably because it meant the sale of fewer Colossal Burgers, says CSPI. With 1,940 calories and 141 grams of fat (more than two days' worth!), one of these megaburgers is equivalent to about five McDonald's Quarter Pounders.
- Uno Chicago Grill's "Pizza Skins." "We start with our famous deep dish crust, add mozzarella and red bliss mashed potatoes, and top it off with crispy bacon, cheddar, and sour cream," says the menu. The menu doesn't disclose that this fusion of pizza and potato skins—which is meant to precede a meal of pizza—packs 2,050 calories, 48 grams of saturated fat, and 3,140 milligrams of sodium (more than a day's worth). "Even if you split it with two other people, it's like eating dinner before your dinner even hits the table," Jacobson said.
- Ruby Tuesday's "Fresh Chicken & Broccoli Pasta." Thanks to its parmesan cream sauce and layer of melted cheese, the 2,060 calories and 128 grams of fat make it the equivalent of two 12-ounce sirloin steaks, two buttered baked potatoes, and two Caesar salads, says CSPI, which describes this dish as "Angioplasta."