

Eating OUT (and) Staying SLIM

by Pam George

*Yummy
restaurant foods
can kill any
hopes to donning
those bikinis.*

*But there are
ways to dine
out without
beefing up.*

Scott Thomas is on familiar terms with most of Sussex County's restaurants. About 10 times a week, Thomas, the executive director of Southern Delaware Tourism, either goes out for a meal or grabs takeout. But all those banquets, staff lunches and dinner meetings can wreak havoc on his waistline. Thomas also has high cholesterol that requires medication.

To keep his weight and cholesterol in check, Thomas created guidelines. For one, he avoids anything white, be it rice, sugar, bread or potatoes. For another, he exchanges fried foods like chips for a healthier option. "I like the results," he says. "If I can stay within those guidelines then I'm less prone to worrying about what I eat."

Having a plan before you crack a menu is a good strategy for anyone looking to maintain a healthy diet and still enjoy restaurant food. But it's not the only one. Even if you don't cook, educate yourself about what's on the plate and how it's prepared. Ask questions and learn about portion size. Don't be shy when it comes to getting what you want.

"All restaurants serve healthy food" says Carol Arnott, an area gourmand who's celebrated for her slim physique. "It's just a matter of making healthy choices."

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Basic Instincts

An anniversary dinner or a girls' night out might prompt you to skip lunch. But you might be so hungry by dinner that you'll eat more than you'd initially planned. Moreover, some experts say that regularly skipping meals will slow down your metabolism.

Carl Georigi of the Platinum Dining Group is fan of three daily meals, even if he's going out that night. He often orders a lunchtime salad with a protein, such as tuna or chicken. "If I'm really hungry, I add a cup of soup to take the edge off," says Georigi, whose restaurants include the new Taverna in Newark and Capers & Lemons in Wilmington.

The goal is to avoid diving into the breadbasket, which takes a beating in diet lore. And with good reason. "Your willpower breaks down when you see warm, crusty, yeasty French bread," says Gretchen Hanson, owner of Hobos Restaurant & Bar in Rehoboth Beach. "Ask the server not to even bring it to the table."

At Culinaria in North Wilmington, the servers ask the diners if they want bread and butter. They don't automatically bring it. The practice avoids waste while it saves waistlines.

Like bread, a cocktail usually starts a meal. Alcohol, of course, contains calories. Few people, however, realize how much mixers can add to the count. Consider that a 12-ounce bottle of tonic water has 124 calories. Packaged juices are packed with sugar. Choose a spritzer, add Perrier to your wine, or order clear alcohol. Only ask for fruit juice if it's freshly squeezed.

Salty bar snacks, meanwhile, are free for a reason. They make you thirsty enough to order that second icy beer. They up your caloric intake and your water weight.

With no bread and a light cocktail, you'll probably want an appetizer. Keep in mind that appetizers are designed to arrive swiftly, Georigi says. That's why so many restaurants have fried options. Turn a cold shoulder. "If I see a cold appetizer—crudo, sashimi, etc. that is a healthier choice than fried anything," he says.



CAPERS & LEMONS - IN WILMINGTON



UBON - WILMINGTON RIVERFRONT



CULTURED PEARL RESTAURANT & SUSHI BAR - IN REHOBOTH BEACH



The Right Stuff

It stands to reason that if you select a restaurant where healthy options are plentiful, you won't be as tempted to pine for jalapeno poppers. Thai dishes, for instance, often include a liberal helping of vegetables. "Stir-fry is fantastic for you," maintains Norrawit "Wit" Milburn, executive chef at Ubon, a Thai restaurant on the Wilmington Riverfront. "Our salads are good for you too."

But even cuisines touted for health benefits have pitfalls. Those watching their weight should nix curries with coconut milk, which can have 35 calories in just a tablespoon. Ubon sparingly uses sugar and salty soy and fish sauce, staples of Thai cuisine. But that's not always the case at Asian restaurants, which pile it on for flavor. "You have to be careful of how a dish has been 'Americanized' to appeal to our palate," Hanson says.

On the surface, sushi seems like a low-cal choice. But Americanized rolls are landmines. They often include ingredients such as spicy mayo, avocado and cream cheese. "Consider simple, traditional rolls with one fish or vegetarian rolls," says Rob Wood, who with his wife, Susan, owns the Cultured Pearl Restaurant & Sushi Bar in Rehoboth Beach. "You can also request that the chef use less rice per roll. Eating straight sashimi (fish only) is the healthiest route."

Americanized Italian dishes, such as cheesy eggplant Parmesan are diet no-nos. But you can say yes to rustic Italian. Consider Taverna's grilled shrimp with grilled vegetable orzo and chili oil. (A tip: spicy foods boost your metabolism.)

The restaurant also serves baked sea bass with mushrooms, green bean and tomatoes in a light seafood broth, and grilled ahi tuna with sautéed escarole and cannellini beans.

Tricks of the Trade

Italian dishes often rely on olive oil, which in its fresh extra-virgin state has health benefits. What you may not realize, though, is that some restaurants toss the pasta with a liberal splash of olive oil before they sauce it. You'll only know for sure if you ask.

Butter is another sneaky ingredient. Many chefs finish a sauce with it. "It gives it a good 'mouth feel' and coats the tongue nicely," explains Laurie Diaz-Searfoss, a private chef and former restaurant owner. "It adds a nice shine." And, yes, it adds calories.

Ask the server if a sauce has butter and/or cream. "If you're not sure, ask for it on the side," Diaz-Searfoss suggests. "You have more control about how much is going on your food."

Dennis Forbes, chef-owner of Cool Springs Fish Bar & Restaurant in Dover, is happy to oblige customers who ask him to hold the butter or oil. Since the meals are prepared to order, that's not an issue. "We have special requests every night," says Forbes, who keeps rice flour on hand for gluten-free patrons.

If you feel like sauce-less fish is a little, well, bland, try salsa or chimichurri sauce, Diaz-Searfoss says. Or,



Chef Gretchen Hanson's Wild Salmon with Artichoke Dijonnaise

SERVES 2

- 4 tablespoons of Dijon or Creole mustard
- 1 tablespoon of dry white wine
- 2-4 artichoke hearts, packed in brine not oil, diced fine
- Pinch of sea salt flakes
- Pinch of white pepper
- 1 teaspoon of organic agave nectar (optional)
- A squeeze of fresh lemon
- 2 4-6 ounce fillets of wild salmon, skin on
- 2 teaspoons or organic canola oil

Mix together everything but the salmon and oil. It should taste creamy and tart. Heat the broiler. While it's heating, drizzle oil in an ovenproof sauté pan until the pan is evenly coated and put on the stove. Heat on high heat. Add the salmon skin side up and sear for two minutes. Flip and put the mustard mixture on top of "meat" side. Move to the broiler for about eight minutes, depending on your heat source. Salmon should still be dark pink inside.



TAVERNA'S - IN MILFORD



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NAGE - REHOBOTH BEACH



ask for a light pan sauce made with wine, stock, tomatoes and fresh herbs.

Avoiding salt? Ask if stocks are made from scratch. "Some chefs take shortcuts and mix water with a stock bouillon," Georgi says. "These are typically loaded with sodium." You won't have that problem at Abbott's Grill in Milford, where soups and stocks are made in house.

Unless you're in a high-end steakhouse, where beef is presented without even a parsley garnish, most meals come with sides. Diners want value, which means they don't want to see the bottom of a plate. Restaurants oblige with huge portions. "How many times do you hear people say they're stuffed and that a restaurant gave them too much food?" Hanson asks. "But if you don't, you get blasted for it. It's a tricky road in the American economy."

Learn about portion sizes. According to the Food Network, one serving of meat is the size of a deck of cards. A helping of pasta or rice is the size of a tennis ball. A baked potato shouldn't be larger than your computer mouse.

Savvy diners with self-control immediately portion their food and take home the rest. That's not easy for most of us. "I'm a member of the clean plate club," Thomas admits.

Substitute, Substitute, Substitute

But Thomas does excel at asking for alternatives. He orders whole wheat bread instead of white and asks for a side salad or veggies instead of fries. Arnott follows the same principles. She orders a sweet potato instead of a white potato, for instance.

No matter your choice, Georgi recommends asking if the veggies are fresh. Even better, see if the restaurant buys from local farmers or farmers' markets.

Also ask the server if salad dressings are made in-house. If not, they might be loaded with artificial ingredients and preservatives. "They can also contain large amounts of sugar," Georgi notes. Good olive oil and vinegar is a safe substitute.

Going vegan or vegetarian for a meal or two is another way to up your meal's healthy quotient. Abbott's Grill offers a grilled vegetable panini, and the restaurant has featured a seitan stir-fry entrée.

Seitan, the "wheat meat," can stand in for regular meat at Home Grown Café in Newark, which prides itself on offering "something for everyone," says chef Eric Aber, who owns the Main Street eatery with his wife, Sasha.

In the beginning, the restaurant offered a choice of proteins on a salad or in a wrap, including tofu, seitan and salmon." It became one of our niche selling points," he says of the have-it-your-way approach. "When this proved successful, we extended the concept to our sandwiches and now most recently to our entrees. It is part of our customer-centric attitude."

For those who to want take a break from meat, Nage in Rehoboth Beach offers Meatless Mondays. "We have a small cult following," says owner Josh Grapski. "Vegetarians love it."

Over at the Cultured Pearl, a favorite veggie dish involves quick-fried tofu in bonito stock dressed with fresh grated daikon, ginger and scallions and livened with a pepper blend. "I personally love this dish," Wood says. "You can make it even healthier by getting the tofu straight up rather than fried — but you have to live a little, so get it fried and go for the crunch."

The Finishing Touch

That urge to live becomes pressing when it comes to dessert. Relax. "My motto is that if you eat dessert once a week and you're responsible about it, just enjoy," Georgi says. Arnott opts for fruit-based desserts or gelato — and she always gets forks for the table.

If you stick to a plan, which might involve nixing an appetizer in favor of dessert, you've earned the sweet reward. In the end, it's all about taking a thoughtful approach to food.

"Be conscious and mindful about what is on the plate in front of you," Diaz-Searfoss concludes. "We all have to take responsibility for our actions."

COOL SPRINGS FISH BAR & RESTAURANT - IN DOVER

