
REALITY CHECK: High-Maintenance Ordering

BY SHARON B. SALOMON, MS, RD

My parents ate out about 15 times a year. By contrast, I eat out five times every week and my friends tell me they eat out three to 10 times a week on average. When you eat out only a few times a year, health concerns probably do not guide your choices—taste does. But when you do a substantial share of your eating in restaurants away from the safety net of your own kitchen, the choices you make about where to dine and what to order become important.

We all laughed and shook our heads in disbelief at the high-maintenance ordering by the lead character, Sally, in the movie “When Harry Met Sally.” Yet I do it myself all the time. I want the chicken but not fried. I want the potatoes but without butter. The salad looks good but I don’t like cheese. So I ask for changes to the dish without considering how they might affect the flavor or presentation.

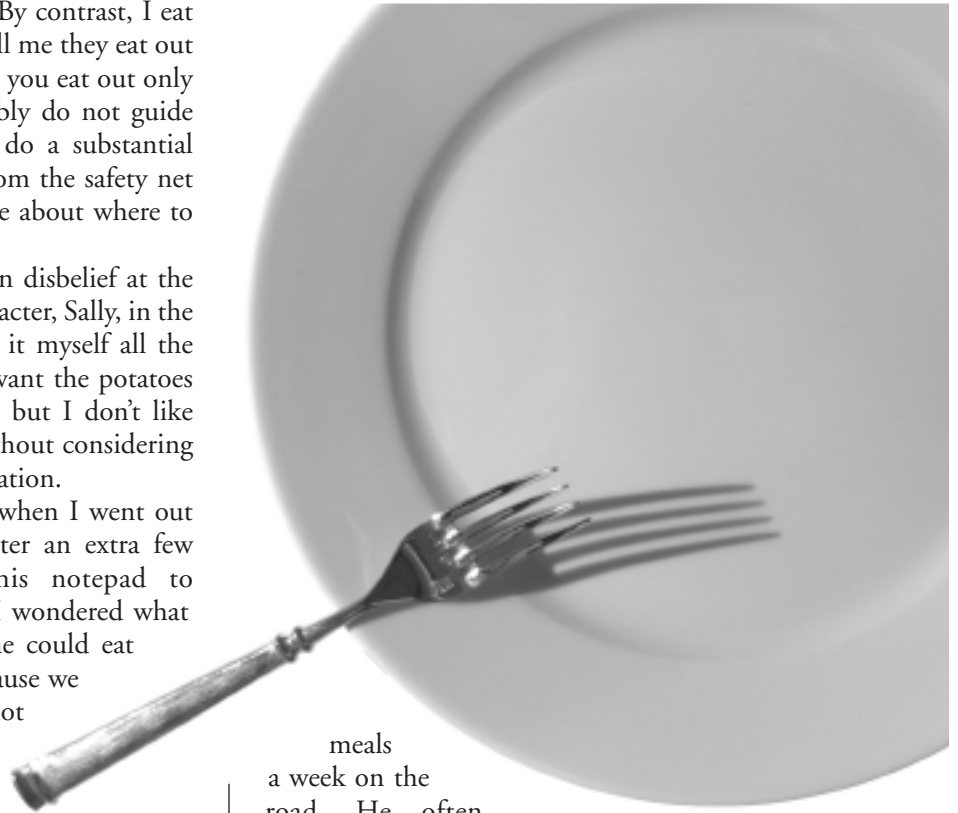
I started to think about that recently when I went out with a group of friends. It took the waiter an extra few minutes and lots of scribbling on his notepad to accommodate everyone’s special requests. I wondered what we were doing at this restaurant if no one could eat what was on the menu! We were there because we wanted to be there but apparently we did not want to eat the chef’s creations. At least, that’s the way it must have seemed when the waiter handed in his ticket.

I’d like to set the record straight: You can eat almost any place without special ordering unless you have a health condition that requires you to avoid certain ingredients or eat specific foods or quantities. If you fall into that category, then the following information is not for you. Stick to foods that meet your needs. The rest of us can learn to order and eat sensibly at almost any kind of restaurant by following a few suggestions.

We have to redirect our thinking. Instead of focusing on what we cannot eat, we should concentrate on what we can and should eat. We are too concerned with fat and calories and sugar and pesticides and all the other bugaboos. What about all the good stuff that is in food: fiber, vitamins, minerals, protein? What about eating whole grains and colorful vegetables and lean protein in restaurants?

Most people, like my friend Starr, make choices based on trade-offs. She peruses the menu and if she sees a dessert that catches her fancy, she avoids bread and/or other starchy foods and stays clear of sauces and anything fried. Then she can reward herself with a dessert—which she will probably share with someone else.

George, who travels extensively for work, eats up to 12



meals a week on the road. He often finds himself in places where the restaurant options are limited. George knows that each meal is just one meal out of many and does the best he can. Breakfast is the easiest meal for him because he knows that all restaurants have oatmeal, low-fat milk and juice. If he knows that he has a big dinner coming up he eats lightly for lunch, having a salad with grilled chicken or fish.

Jan, who is very concerned about what she eats, says she can find something to eat in almost any restaurant. There’s usually fish or chicken. There are always vegetables and often salad. For Jan, who is not much of a foodie, eating out is a social experience. She eats what she can but knows if she is still hungry when she gets home, she can eat a bowl of cereal or a cup of yogurt.

Neither Starr nor George nor Jan has to ask the chef to do anything special to the meal. They police their own eating. They are concerned with eating healthfully but they know they can manage the menu themselves without asking for many modifications.

Probably the biggest problem with American restaurant food is portion size. Restaurateurs say that they are forced to offer larger meals because people want to feel that they are

getting their money's worth. Most of us would not serve ourselves half a pound of meat in a deli sandwich if we were preparing it at home, but we expect a nice thick sandwich when we eat out because we are "paying for it." Then we complain that restaurant food is making us fat. I believe in personal responsibility. If there's too much food on your plate, don't eat it all. If the sauce contains too much fat, push it aside. If you want a low-fat salad dressing, ask for some vinegar and oil and make your own.

Rarely do we eat three-course meals at home. Why do we eat that way when we eat out? I am often tempted to order an appetizer as well as entrée and dessert because I want to try a lot of different dishes, especially if it is my first time at a restaurant. I have tried to redirect my thinking on this excess. If I like what I have eaten, then I just make a decision to return sometime soon to try other dishes.

And sometimes, like my friend Wendy who almost always thinks about health when ordering, you just have to "give into the moment and enjoy!"

A VALLEY CHEF SPEAKS OUT ON HIGH-MAINTENANCE DINERS

One chef at an upscale Valley restaurant has some very definite ideas about guests who "special order." The chef says that the restaurant's customers are "fairly well educated and well traveled" and go to the restaurant because "they know they will get something satisfying, something relatively pure, something simply prepared." The wait-staff is instructed to get as much info as possible from the customer who asks for changes to a dish to make sure that the person with a health concern does get what he or she needs, if the chef can provide it. Allergies, of course, are treated with the utmost respect and the chef makes every effort possible to ensure that the diner gets a dish that is safe to eat.

On the other hand, the chef asserts that diners often ask for lots of changes that are "unfounded" based on "whatever they happened to read in the paper that week." The chef believes that if a diner knows the real reason for cutting back on salt or fat or carbohydrate, he or she will know what to order off the menu without asking for modifications.

The chef wishes that customers who special order would think about it like this: "The kitchen is riding a bicycle ... every time someone wants to change things up when it's busy, it's like jamming a stick into the spokes ... everything comes to a stop while we reinvent the menu to accommodate differences. Why are you dining out, anyway? Have a sense of adventure! You can always get back on track tomorrow, if it's that important to you!!! Enjoy all things in moderation!"

TOP 12 LOW-MAINTENANCE TIPS

Here are my suggestions for eating out without too much high-maintenance ordering:

1. *Call the restaurant before you go or check online for a menu.* Remember that the chef has spent a long time perfecting each dish. Asking for too many modifications may ruin what would be an otherwise delicious meal. Oftentimes, the chef would prefer the opportunity to make you something that meets your dietary needs from ingredients already on hand.
2. *Read the whole menu before you settle on a dish.* Take time to weigh your options.
3. *Ask questions.* How big are the appetizers? What's in the dinner salad? What sides are served with the entrée?
4. *Order a salad and an appetizer instead of an entrée,* especially if you already know that the restaurant serves very large portions.
5. *Request a to-go box before you start eating* if you must order the entrée because you are dying to try it. Stash half of the food in the box. Out of sight, out of mind.
6. *Ask the waiter to go light on the dressing.* When you order salad dressing on the side, the portion is often much larger than what the kitchen would have put on your salad. You're usually better off allowing the kitchen to dress your salad.
7. *Return the bread basket to the server* (and be sure that she takes the butter with her!), unless the restaurant serves bread to die for. Most of us do not eat bread with our meals at home.
8. *Remember that olive oil has the same calories as butter.* For all of you who think that dipping your bread in olive oil is so much more virtuous than using butter, think again! Although olive oil is a better choice when you are concerned about the kind of fat you are eating, it would be better to just eat the bread plain. If the bread is good enough to eat, it's good enough to eat plain.
9. *Share food.* I know this is a tough one. My husband and I rarely agree on what to order so we order what I want! Eat with people who like the same food you do. That should make life simpler.
10. *Don't eat the high-fat portions of the meal.* If you are eating at an event and find a huge piece of chicken-fried steak staring at you, don't worry. Wipe away the sauce with your fork, peel off the breading and enjoy the meat. There are always ways for you to modify what is in front of you without asking for any special consideration from the kitchen.
11. *Stop eating when you are full* but before you have to open the top button on your pants! Know when you have had enough.
12. *Eat what you like so you don't feel deprived.* Pay attention to your food! Look at it. Smell it. Eat it slowly to savor the flavor.