

First lady makes headway calling for healthy foods

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First Lady Michelle Obama, accompanied by Darden chef Julie Elkinton, standing right, talks to Donna Brown, seated from right clockwise, and her children Nichol, 13, Cody 12, and Casey, 18, from Kennett Square, Pa., during a Let's Move! event in a Darden restaurant in Hyattsville, Md., Thursday, Sept. 15, 2011. The first lady announced Darden Restaurants' commitment to reduce its calorie and sodium footprint and to provide greater choice and variety on its children's menus and make healthy options the default choice whenever possible. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta)

(AP) -- Calorie by calorie, first lady Michelle Obama is chipping away at big portions and unhealthy food in an effort to help America slim down.

In the year and a half since she announced her campaign to curb

[childhood obesity](#), Mrs. Obama has stood alongside Wal-Mart, Olive Garden and many other [food](#) companies as they have announced improvements to their recipes - fewer calories, less sodium, better children's menus.

The changes are small steps, in most cases. [Fried foods](#) and [french fries](#) will still be on the menu, though enticing pictures of those foods may be gone. High-sodium soups, which many consumers prefer, will still be on the grocery aisle. But the amount of sodium in each can will gradually decrease in some cases, and the taste of their low-sodium variety will be improved.

On Thursday, the first lady joined Darden Restaurants Inc. executives at one of their Olive Garden restaurants in Hyattsville, Md., near Washington to announce that the company's chains are pledging to cut calories and sodium in their meals by 20 percent over a decade. Fruit or vegetable side dishes and low-fat milk will become standard with kids' meals unless a substitution is requested.

Mrs. Obama said Darden's announcement is a "breakthrough moment" for the industry. The company owns 1,900 restaurants in 49 states, including Olive Garden, Red Lobster, LongHorn Steakhouse, The Capital Grille, Bahama Breeze and Seasons 52.

"I believe the changes that Darden will make could impact the health and well-being of an entire generation of young people," the first lady said.

McDonald's, Burger King and more than a dozen other restaurants have also said this summer that they will revamp children's menus. Changing recipes and menu items is good business for the industry because consumers want wider choices - chefs and [food manufacturers](#) say consumers are demanding more healthy food than ever before.

Nutrition advocates and food industry representatives say that the first lady embraced the issue just as consumers began to demand healthier foods and advocates were making headway in getting industry to make foods healthier. They say she has been a key catalyst in getting lawmakers and companies to jump on board.

"There's been more progress on nutrition in the last several years than in the whole previous decade," says Margo Wootan, a leading nutrition advocate and lobbyist with the Center for Science in the Public Interest who has been working on the issue for almost 20 years. "There is a lot of momentum in addressing obesity right now and the first lady adds significant momentum to that movement."

Wootan says Mrs. Obama and her staff have done more than just public appearances, working behind the scenes with industry and Congress to affect change. "She does more than use the bully pulpit," says Wootan.

The landscape has certainly changed for the food industry since President Barack Obama took office and the first lady launched her campaign. In that time, Congress has passed laws to improve school lunches, improve food safety and require calorie labeling in restaurants, all with industry support. The administration has proposed new food marketing rules for children and the food industry has come at least part of the way with their own proposal to limit marketing to kids. Major companies have launched a joint effort to cut calories and put more nutrition information on food labels.

The first lady's effort has had "a dramatic impact on manufacturers, restaurants and retailers," says Scott Faber, a lobbyist for the Grocery Manufacturers Association, which represents all of the major food companies. "Until the first lady launched her initiative there was no one American who was inspiring this generation of kids and parents to do more to have a healthy lifestyle."

Mrs. Obama's participation with Darden Restaurants was her latest appearance with retailers and other private-sector players in support of her anti-obesity campaign. In January, she stood with Wal-Mart, the nation's largest grocer, as it pledged to reformulate thousands of products it sells to make them healthier and to push suppliers to do the same.

This summer, the first lady applauded as Wal-Mart, Walgreens drug stores and several regional grocers committed to help eliminate "food deserts" by opening or expanding in rural and urban areas without easy access to healthy foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables.

One in three U.S. children is overweight or obese, putting them at greater risk of developing diabetes, heart disease or other health conditions. Mrs. Obama has said her goal is to help today's youngsters become adults at a healthy weight by eating better and getting more exercise.

In a speech to the National Restaurant Association one year ago this month, the first lady asked members to "actively promote healthy foods and healthy habits to our kids."

Dawn Sweeney, CEO of the association, said that was an "acceleration point" for many restaurants that were already starting to change their menus.

"Certainly the focus she has put on food and healthy living has been a great boost to create even broader consumer interest," Sweeney said.

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