# Low-calorie restaurant menus: Are they making us fat?

April 15 2014

Depending on our food cravings, the number of items served, and even the time of day, ordering a meal at a restaurant often requires a "narrowing down" decision making process. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, restaurants that now provide "low-calorie" labels on their menus can inadvertently cause people to eliminate healthy foods right off the bat.

"Because most restaurant menus are quite complex—offering numerous dishes composed of multiple ingredients—diners try to simplify their decision. People have come to expect low-calorie food to taste bad or not fill them up," write authors Jeffrey R. Parker (Georgia State University) and Donald R. Lehmann (Columbia University). "We propose that by calorie organizing a menu, restaurants make it easier for people to use the general 'low-calorie' label to dismiss all low-calorie options early in the decision process."

In four online studies, the authors asked participants to order food from menus similar to what they might encounter at well-known chain restaurants. Some participants were shown traditional menus that listed available dishes in food-type categories (with no calorie information on the menu). Another set of participants was given the same menus, but with calorie information provided by each dish. A third group was given the calorie-labeled menus with the low-calorie dishes grouped together and given a low-calorie section label.

Study results showed that the participants who were given the traditional

menus without any calorie information and the menus with the low-calorie food grouped together ordered food with similar amounts of calories. Interestingly, the participants who ordered from the calorie-labeled (but not grouped) menus ordered meals with fewer calories overall.

"When a menu is calorie posted but not calorie organized, it is less likely that the caloric-content of the dishes will be used as an initial filter for eliminating large portions of the menu," the authors conclude. "For the consumer, this means you are more likely to consider ordering a low-calorie dish and also more likely to eat it too."

  **More information:** Jeffrey R. Parker and Donald R. Lehmann. "How and When Grouping Low-Calorie Options Reduces the Benefits of Providing Dish-Specific Calorie Information." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2014.

Provided by University of Chicago