

Sweet sizzlin' beans! Fancy names may boost healthy dining

June 12 2017, by Lindsey Tanner



This Jan. 20, 2017, file photo shows roasted carrot hummus with crudite and pita chips at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York. In an experiment at a Stanford University cafeteria, researchers got more diners to choose vegetables by using fancy-sounding names instead of using labels like low-fat, reduced-sodium or sugar-free. (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

Researchers tried a big serving of food psychology and a dollop of trickery to get diners to eat their vegetables. And it worked.

Veggies given names like "zesty ginger-turmeric sweet potatoes" and "twisted citrus-glazed carrots" were more popular than those prepared exactly the same way but with plainer, more healthful-sounding labels. Diners more often said "no thanks" when the food had labels like "low-fat," "reduced-sodium" or "sugar-free."

More diners chose the fancy-named items, and selected larger portions of them too in the experiment last fall at a Stanford University cafeteria.

"While it may seem like a good idea to emphasize the healthiness of vegetables, doing so may actually backfire," said lead author Bradley Turnwald, a graduate student in psychology.

Other research has shown that people tend to think of healthful sounding food as less tasty, so the aim was to make it sound as good as more indulgent, fattening fare.

Researchers from Stanford's psychology department tested the idea as a way to improve eating habits and make a dent in the growing obesity epidemic .

"This novel, low-cost intervention could easily be implemented in cafeterias, restaurants, and consumer products to increase selection of healthier options," they said.

The results were published Monday *JAMA Internal Medicine*.

The study was done over 46 days last fall. Lunchtime [vegetable](#) offerings were given different labels on different days. For example, on one day diners could choose "dynamite chili and tangy lime-seasoned beets." On other days the same item was labeled "lighter-choice beets with no added sugar," "high antioxidant beets," or simply "beets."

Almost one-third of the nearly 28,000 diners chose a vegetable offering during the study. The tasty-sounding offering was the most popular, selected by about 220 diners on average on days it was offered, compared with about 175 diners who chose the simple-label vegetable. The healthy-sounding labels were the least popular.

Diners also served themselves bigger portions of the tasty-sounding vegetables than of the other choices.

Turnwald emphasized that "there was no deception"— all labels accurately described the vegetables, although diners weren't told that the different-sounding choices were the exact same item.

The results illustrate "the interesting advantage to indulgent labeling," he said.

Dr. Stephen Cook, a University of Rochester childhood obesity researcher, called the study encouraging and said some high school cafeterias have also tried different labels to influence healthy eating.

"It shouldn't be a surprise to us because marketing people have been doing this for years," Cook said.

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