

# SmartBlog on Restaurants » A healthy menu is in the eye of the beholder

<http://smartblogs.com/restaurants/2011/08/22/health-is-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder/>

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Healthy eating has clearly become a priority for most Americans. According to the National Restaurant Association, 73% of consumers say they now try to choose healthful items when they go out to eat.

But what exactly constitutes “healthy food”? Sure, there may be nutritional and scientific definitions. And recently enacted menu-labeling regulations seem to have designated calorie totals as the bellwether for health. But ask 10 people to explain what they consider to be healthy food, and you’ll likely get 10 different answers.

That’s because health means different things to different people — and that variation is actually good news for restaurateurs. Because different consumers define healthy food in different ways, there are a range of opportunities for restaurants to improve the health perceptions of their offerings. Brands don’t have to limit themselves to competing in an area where other chains might already have an advantage.

The most common healthy angle for brands is **low-fat and/or low-calorie**. Applebee’s has its Under 550 Calorie menu, and Taco Bell’s Drive Thru Diet menu features seven items with less than nine grams of fat. Some companies stand out because the entire concept centers on a “low” claim. Energy Kitchen — the New York-based chain of 11 stores selling burgers, sandwiches and wraps — bills itself as having a menu where nothing is more than 500 calories.

But there are plenty of other healthy approaches which resonate with consumers. Subway, which many consumers credit with having healthier options than most fast feeders, emphasizes the **freshness** of its products. The chain’s setup, which allows customers to watch employees make the products for them, appeals to people who equate health with freshly prepared products made from fresh ingredients. Its “Fresh Fit Menu” moniker reinforces the healthy perception it wants to create through freshness.

**Natural and sustainable** is what gives Chipotle a healthy halo. “Food with Integrity” is the way it talks about its commitment to sustainably raised food, meat and milk from animals raised without antibiotics or added hormones, and organic and local produce. Its website makes its point of view on health clear: “It’s very important to consume only as many calories as is recommended in a day ... [but] foods that are unprocessed and un-tampered with (like at Chipotle) are more filling and nutritious than the synthetic foods you might find at other restaurants.” Because of this approach, some consumers perceive a 1,000+ calorie burrito is a healthy option.

Chick-fil-A enjoys a similar advantage through the **simplicity** of its products and menu. Its classic chicken sandwich is comprised of three ingredients: a chicken fillet, dill pickle chips and a bun. This bare-bones approach appeals to people who perceive simpler ingredients and simpler builds to be more pure and natural, and therefore healthier. The approach has become more popular thanks to efforts like Frito Lay’s Power of Three campaign, which asks, “Did you know many of your favorite

snacks are made with just three simple ingredients?”

And then there's the **wholesome** angle which Panera Bread uses to create a perception of health. From its website that declares, “We are bakers of bread,” to the layout of its restaurants, which emphasizes its bakery offerings, to the “Hot Bread!” cheer its crew exclaims when pulling bread from the oven, Panera promotes itself primarily as a bakery. That, combined with ingredients that seem higher quality and more special, gives the brand a wholesome feel. And wholesome translates into healthy perceptions for many because it seems closer to homemade.

Vegetarian, grilled, liquid (i.e., soups and smoothies) and salads are other approaches that communicate health to certain consumers. There really are so many ways to position a restaurant as healthy.

Despite what so-called experts say and what the government requires, **health really is in the eye of the beholder**. The key is to identify what resonates with a particular target audience. When a unique consumer need is met by a unique restaurant capability, the result is a winning brand concept.

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