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Healthy Restaurant Destination? Just Think Twice

Which would you choose if you wanted a healthy meal—a fast food or full-service restaurant? Recent survey results show that consumers with less diet and health knowledge tend to choose a full-service restaurant, while those with more knowledge are just as likely to choose a fast food restaurant.

When making choices about where and how often to eat out, U.S. consumers balance a number of sometimes competing desires. Consumers search not only for low prices, but also for taste, convenience, entertainment, and nutrition when deciding where to eat. An ERS analysis of a 2002 consumer survey conducted by Rutgers University finds that respondents who were more willing to forgo other food attributes for convenience were about 8 percent more likely to dine out at least every few days. Respondents citing convenience as the main factor influencing their away-from-home food choices were 17 percent more likely to purchase fast food than were respondents who did not place a premium on convenience.

Survey respondents looking for healthful foods were 19 percent more likely to patronize full-service restaurants (eating places with wait staff) than fast food outlets. This type of rule-of-thumb decisionmaking—in this case, methodical avoidance of fast food—can be a result of limited information. Market research shows that consumers often develop decision rules to compensate for an inability to gather or understand more nuanced information.

In fact, meals and snacks consumed at full-service restaurants are not necessarily nutritionally superior to meals purchased at fast food restaurants. Compared with fast food meals, full-service meals tend to be higher in fat, cholesterol, and sodium, though lower in saturated fats. Both types of eating places offer healthful food choices. Survey analysis suggests that respondents with better diet-health knowledge recognize this. When looking for healthful food, they are equally likely to eat at fast food or full-service restaurants. This sug-



Comstock

gests that informed consumers are better able to navigate the away-from-home market, while less knowledgeable ones live by rules of thumb that can be inaccurate. \forall

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This finding is drawn from . . .

Let's Eat Out: Americans Weigh Taste, Convenience, and Nutrition, by Hayden Stewart, Noel Blisard, and Dean Jolliffe, EIB-19, USDA, Economic Research Service, October 2006, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib19/

The Food Service Chapter of the ERS Briefing Room on Food Market Structures, www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodmarketstructures/foodservice.asp