

Hartford Courant.



WEDNESDAY, APRIL 18, 2007

Put Calories On The Menu

Should restaurants tell you what you're eating? Connecticut legislators supporting Senate Bill 686, which would require the posting of calories on the menus and

KELLY D. BROWNELL

menu boards of restaurant chains, think you do. The public supports the idea and nutrition experts agree that nutrition knowledge is important. Yet the restaurant industry is fighting hard against this bill, arguing that consumers do not want the information, that they provide it anyway, that it will hurt restaurants and that it intrudes on personal freedom because people are being told what to eat.

Where is the truth?

Making nutrition decisions is hard if we have no information about the food we eat in restaurants. Eating out is no longer an occasional indulgence. Americans in 1970 spent 26 percent of every food dollar eating outside the home; today the figure is 46 percent.

About one-third of America's calories come from restaurants and other food service vendors. Drive-through windows, breakfast at fast-food places and chains open 24 hours a day were unimaginable several decades ago. Restaurant food is a real player in the nation's nutrition landscape, and restaurants can hold surprises.

In my youth "having a Coke" meant an eight-ounce bottle. Now, the small size at McDonald's is 16 ounces, and the large is 32 ounces — this has 24 teaspoons of sugar. Today's small fries at McDonald's used to be the only size.

The spirit of legislation requiring calorie labeling is to inform consumers, to give them information they can choose to use or not. It is to enhance personal freedom and does not limit choices or instruct people what to eat. Why would the restaurant industry fight this?

The industry claims the labeling would be a burden on restaurants. They claim mom and pop restaurants cannot afford this, but only chains (10 or more outlets) are affected. Most chains this large have the information anyway, and will be required by

New York City to have the information posted a year before Connecticut's law would take effect. Opponents also say restaurants have the information available to consumers now, but try to find it in some restaurants or see if you can locate calorie information on websites of chains such as Outback and T.G.I. Friday's.

The opposition's more important but unstated reasons, in my opinion, have to do with reputation, profits and precedent.

First is the sticker shock consumers experience when they learn that a single meal or even an appetizer could have a lion's share of a full day's calories. Second, consumers are likely to demand smaller portions, which could hurt profits.

A restaurant offering you large portions pays little for the extra food because the larger costs from facilities, payroll and marketing have been paid. Third, a public focused on the long-term health consequences of restaurant food may not be pleased with what they see and get mad at the restaurant industry, much like consumers became furious with the tobacco companies.



It is a matter of time before this type of legislation takes hold around the country. A public opinion poll last year found that

83 percent of Americans favor calorie labeling at restaurants. New York City has done this already, and other states have proposed or will soon propose similar bills.

Americans savor their liberty and believe that freedom is enhanced by having the information to make choices. Clothing labels inform us of fabrics, cleaning products have their ingredients listed and most products sold in food stores have labels. Knowing what we eat in restaurants can help people with medical conditions who need the information and parents making choices that

affect their children. Any American who dines in restaurants might benefit from the added information.

Servers are trained to ask, "Do you have any questions about the specials or the menu?" Americans are saying, "Yes, we want to know about calories." They're entitled to answers.

Kelly D. Brownell, Ph.D., is a professor of psychology, epidemiology and public health and is director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University.