

Does Home-Cooked Mean Healthy?

By now, you've probably heard the reports highlighting the increased portions, high calories, and nutritional disadvantages of restaurant meals. Now that the economy is reportedly prompting us to cook more, we might assume that we are eating healthier. Maybe not. Home-cooked foods have also seen the same unhealthy trends as restaurant foods, according to a new Cornell University study. In the study, the average calories per serving jumped 63 percent among the recipes followed over the past 70 years. Home cooking often still holds a nutritional and weight control advantage over eating out; this study simply reminds us of the need for a quick mental check before we assume that our home-cooked meal is truly healthy.

The Cornell study examined 18 recipes published in all editions of the classic cookbook, *The Joy of Cooking*, starting from the first 1936 edition through the latest in 2006. Calories increased as recipes called for larger amounts of butter, sugar and sour cream. Dishes that originated with little meat added larger amounts.

Portion sizes also expanded through the years. Most notable was the 33 percent increase in portion size that occurred from the 1990s cookbook to the current edition. The same amount of chicken gumbo that was once considered 14 servings is now 10. Using the same size pan, a recipe that made 48 brownies in 1946 shrunk to 30 in the 1960s and now makes only 15 brownies.

However, not all the changes are bad. In the 1946 edition of *The Joy of Cooking* that I inherited from my mother, the section on vegetables includes only two to four ways of fixing many of them. Most often, one of those is boiling the vegetable and another is sautéing or frying. Each generally relies

on butter, cream sauce, cheese sauce or Hollandaise sauce for added flavor, rather than the herbs, spices and flavored vinegars favored today. Some vegetables, such as bok choy, aren't even included. There's no encouragement to exceed a basic half-cup portion, whereas today's health message encourages us to make vegetables a major portion of our plates.

To ensure healthy home-cooked meals. Brian Wansink, lead author of the Cornell study, suggests assuming that today's recipes make twice as many servings as stated to achieve healthy portions. When it comes to baked goods, if a recipe says it has 400 calories per serving, whatever the serving size, it's too big.

Another option is to look at amounts of basic ingredients in a recipe and adjust as needed. For desserts, you can also look at the amount of fat and sugar and divide by the number of servings. If there's a tablespoon or more of sugar or fats (butter, margarine or oil) per serving, try cutting back on the amount by about a quarter. For a mixed dish like stew, gumbo, goulash or chili, put in two-and-a-half to four ounces of uncooked boneless meat, fish or poultry for each person you're serving to provide an adequate two- to three-ounce serving after it's cooked. Double up on the vegetables or add one or two additional types to include at least a half-cup of non-starchy vegetables per person (potatoes count as a starchy vegetable); a cup or cup-and-a-half is even better.

Studies show that when we eat out, calorie consumption increases and nutritional quality decreases. But if we cook at home most of the time, what we eat there matters. Don't assume it's healthy; limit portions and watch ingredients to make sure it is.