

# From Stealth Health to Nutritious and Delicious

## *The Culinary Institute of America's Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative*

Christine Rosenbloom, PhD, RDN, CSSD

Today's diners want "slightly healthier" menu items when dining out. The Culinary Institute of America's Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative is helping diners eat nutritious and delicious foods through innovations in recipe development. Focus areas for the Culinary Institute of America's collaborative include reducing sodium, increasing fruits and vegetables, and decreasing calories in meals in quick-service restaurants, children's meals, campus dining, and other volume food-service operations. This article describes the history of the collaborative and shares ways in which they are changing the way Americans eat when dining out. *Nutr Today*. 2014;49(3):153–159

Watermelon, arugula and feta salad

Island grilled mahi mahi and shrimp

Basil Parmesan griller sandwich with pecan berry salad

Herb roasted chicken with mushroom farrotto

If you thought these menu items were from white-tablecloth, fine-dining restaurants, think again. All of these items are on the menus of casual, quick-service restaurants. Once upon a time, quick-service and fast-food restaurants were linked in the public's mind with super-sized portions, greasy burgers, fried chicken, and French fries. Campus dining was not much better. I remember "mystery meat" and "fried bologna" in my college cafeteria. But, as Bob Dylan sang long ago, "the times they are a-changin'." Thanks to the rising awareness of the link between obesity and chronic diseases, coupled with government and professional organizations' initiatives on good nutrition and healthy eating, nutrition is on the mind of many consumers. Foodservice establishments including campus dining, quick-service restaurants, and commercial foodservice in airports,

**Christine Rosenbloom, PhD, RDN, CSSD**, is professor emerita of nutrition at Georgia State University in Atlanta. Currently, she owns a consulting business, Chris Rosenbloom Food and Nutrition Services, LLC. She is editor-in-chief of the 2012 fifth edition of *Sports Nutrition: A Manual for Professionals* published by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Dr Rosenbloom is a member of the speaker's bureau for the Gatorade Sports Science Institute and a research report writer for Unilever.

Correspondence: Christine Rosenbloom, PhD, RDN, CSSD, 179 Honeysuckle Ln, Hartwell, GA 30643 (chrisrosenbloom@gmail.com).

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hospitals, and workplaces are joining the effort by offering healthier options on their menus. Let us be clear that neither every restaurant nor will every item will fall in the healthy category. It has also been noted that sometimes diners consumed more calories when foods were perceived as healthy. Chandon and Wansink<sup>1</sup> described a "health halo" effect when consumers perceived the food as healthy. Consumers both underestimated the calories they ate and were more likely to order side items and/or desserts when they thought their entrée was healthy. With mandatory calorie label looming (currently, restaurant chains with more than 20 outlets must post calories on menus or menu boards), consumers will know how many calories are in their favorite dishes. However, health goes beyond calories, and foodservice operators are looking for ways to provide more than lower-calorie foods.

*Datassential*, a national market and menu research firm, conducted surveys with many quick-service foodservice operators to understand the importance of providing healthy options to their customers. They found that the majority of those surveyed wanted to be part of the solution in providing healthy food options and believed that healthy menu items promote good will among customers even if the items are not the best sellers.<sup>2</sup>

Starting in 2004, the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) partnered with the Harvard School of Public Health to offer a yearly retreat called World of Healthy Flavors. This venture was designed to review the latest nutrition science and marry the science with healthful recipe development. The goal was to help corporate chefs of chain restaurants, supermarkets, and volume foodservice operations expand options for healthy menu items. Out of that educational initiative, the CIA's Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative (HMC) was born. The member companies are listed in Table 1. The mission of the HMC is to "collectively engage with foodservice industry leaders, resource specialists, manufacturers, and other suppliers to identify and explore nonproprietary culinary insights, applications, strategies, and solutions that can help chain restaurants and other large-volume foodservice providers fulfill the customers' desire for delicious and nutritious menu choices," says Pam Smith, RD, culinary nutrition specialist and cochair of the HMC. The HMC identified 4 focus areas including reducing sodium, increasing use of fruits and vegetables, reducing calories, and improving carbohydrate quality (with a focus on both increasing use of whole grains and finding more alternatives to

**TABLE 1** Current Members of the Culinary Institute of America's Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative (as of 2014)

ARAMARK Corporation
Black Angus Steak House
Brinker
Cheesecake Factory
Compass Group, the Americas
Cracker Barrel
Dunkin' Brands
Google, Inc
Harvard University Dining
IHOP
McAlister's Deli
McDonald's Corporation
Morrison's Management Specialists
Not Your Average Joe's
Olive Garden
On the Border
Panda Restaurant Group/Panda Express
Panera Bread
Qdoba
Red Lobster
Ruby Tuesday
Shaping America's Plate
Sodexo
University of California Berkeley/Cal Dining
Uno Restaurant Corporation
Whataburger LP
Yale Dining

sugar-sweetened beverages). The ways in which HMC members have addressed these targeted areas demonstrate creativity and ingenuity without sacrificing taste and customer satisfaction. This article explores some of the drivers of this movement and highlights a few of the ways in which chefs and vol-

ume foodservice operations are helping the public eat healthy and delicious foods.

**What Does the Consumer Want?**

Many years ago, a "stealth health" approach was used in the foodservice industry; in other words, a menu choice might be healthy, but it was not identified as such. Chefs learned that items listed as "light" or "heart healthy" just did not sell as well as other items. Today's consumer wants transparency, and they want "slightly" healthier options when dining out. That is what Unilever Food Solutions, 2012 World Menu Report, "Seductive Nutrition," discovered.<sup>3</sup> The report (available online at <http://www.unileverfoodsolutions.us/our-services/your-menu/seductive-nutrition>) analyzed the responses from a sample of 5000 people (500 from 10 countries) in the developed and developing world who ate out at least once a week. Questions from the survey are found in Table 2.

The findings from the survey revealed insights that chefs and foodservice operators can use to meet the needs of patrons who want healthier options. Consumers from around the globe want to eat healthfully when dining out but also want to treat themselves. Too often customers view the healthy menu options as less desirable (believing portions will be smaller, more expensive, and less tasty). How does a chef or foodservice operator meet those contrasting

**TABLE 2** Questions From Unilever Food Solutions World Menu Report Global Research Findings 2012<sup>a</sup>

• When eating out, how often do you deliberately look for the healthy option?
• Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following with regard to choosing healthy food while eating out: "When eating out, I prefer to treat myself."
• Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following: "I would prefer to have slightly healthier food options when eating out."
• When eating out, how often do you substitute a part of a dish for something more healthy?
• Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following with regard to choosing healthy foods while eating out: "Healthy options tend to be more expensive."
• Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following with regard to choosing healthy food while eating out: "The healthy option is not very filling."
• Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following with regard to choosing healthy food while eating out: "Often the healthy option is not very tasty."
<sup>a</sup> The report can be accessed from <a href="http://www.unileverfoodsolutions.us/our-services/your-menu/seductive-nutrition">http://www.unileverfoodsolutions.us/our-services/your-menu/seductive-nutrition</a> . <sup>3</sup>

goals? “The research shows that people still want to enjoy their favorite dishes when they eat out. That’s why we suggest chefs and operators start by making small changes and create dishes that are slightly healthier instead of overhauling the entire menu,” says Lisa Carlson, MS, RD, nutrition manager of Unilever Food Service Solutions. The term “slightly” healthier was used to describe small changes to a favorite dish rather than swapping the dish for a healthy alternative. The survey found that two-thirds of respondents (66%) worldwide indicated their preference for “slightly” healthier options. Carlson adds, “We also encourage chefs to use delicious descriptors to nudge diners to the healthier choice.” From the 2012 report, the concept of “seductive nutrition” was born; a 2-step approach to seduce the diner with delicious, healthful menu choices and to romance them with descriptors that appeal to today’s consumers. Chefs recognize the desire of some patrons to eat healthier when they dine out, but not all customers want healthy offerings. In the National Restaurant Association’s “What’s Hot 2013 Chef Survey,” nutrition and health ranked only number 16 of 20 hot trends, but 8 of the top 20 trends related to healthy dining.<sup>4</sup> The 1800 chefs who were surveyed identified healthful kid’s meals, children’s nutrition, gluten-free cuisine, whole grain items in kid’s meals, non-wheat noodles/pasta (eg, quinoa, rice, buckwheat), fruit and vegetable side items in children’s meals, and half or smaller portions for a smaller price as top trends. Does nutrition sell? According to a report from the Hudson Institute, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, lower-calorie food and beverages are fueling chain restaurant growth.<sup>5</sup> Twenty-one restaurant chains were included in an analysis conducted between 2006 and 2011 and found that chains that were growing their lower-calorie food and beverage items saw an increase in overall sales of the healthier items and increased restaurant traffic, whereas those chains that were not recorded a decline in sales and traffic. The report concluded that restaurants that emphasize lower-calorie foods and beverages can improve sales, and this could incentivize restaurant chains to lower their calorie “footprint” to improve sales and help address the obesity problem.<sup>5</sup>

### The Top 3 Focus Areas of HMC

#### Sodium Reduction

The first focus area of the HMC is sodium reduction. In April 2010, the New York City Health Department partnered with 90 state and local health authorities and national health organizations to spearhead the National Salt Reduction Initiative with the twin goals of reducing sodium content in foods by 25% and decreasing population sodium intake by 20% by 2014.<sup>6</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that the vast majority of sodium intake comes from restaurant and processed foods,

and high-sodium intakes contribute to an increased risk of developing high blood pressure, heart attack, and stroke.<sup>7</sup> Reducing sodium could potentially prevent thousands of deaths in the United States each year.<sup>7</sup> Among HMC members, 81% have had a sodium reduction strategy in place for a year or longer, and about one-third of members actively participate in the National Salt Reduction Initiative.<sup>2</sup> Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative members overwhelmingly agree (85%) that sodium reduction is a long-term strategy for the industry. A Harvard School of Public Health and CIA collaboration in 2010 outlined strategies for reducing sodium without cutting salt.<sup>8</sup> Some of the strategies that have been adopted by HMC members are listed in Table 3. Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative members have reduced an average of 18% sodium reduction over the past 2 years and report an average of 42% of the menus currently incorporate reduced sodium ingredients, options, and items.<sup>2</sup> Reformulating dishes to be lower in sodium involve more than simply reducing salt. The sodium-reducing tools used by HMC members include flavor development that does not rely on sodium (reported by 96% of members), addition of fruit and vegetable ingredients (67%), preparation techniques (67%), and expanding ethnic cuisine offerings that traditionally do not rely on salt to impart flavor (63%).<sup>2</sup> Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative members report that sauces, salad dressings, vinaigrettes, and soups are the easiest foods for sodium reduction. The most challenging foods for sodium reduction include breads, rolls, baked goods, deli

**TABLE 3 Strategies Used by Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative Members to Reduce Sodium**

• Using produce that is naturally lower in sodium
• Gradually reducing sodium to help retrain taste buds
• Using enticing descriptors on menus such as “citrus infused,” or “touch of sea salt,” instead of low sodium
• Seeking peak-of-season produce for best possible taste
• Experimenting with sodium-free flavor enhancers such as lemon, lime, garlic, cinnamon, basil, and chili peppers
• Roasting or toasting nuts and seeds to impart rich flavor
• Layering flavors with umami-rich, low-sodium ingredients such as mushrooms, carrots, seaweed, Chinese cabbage, and tomatoes
• Adopting cooking techniques such as searing, roasting, and sautéing to bring out flavor without salt
• Developing global flavors from cuisines that do not rely as heavily on salt for flavor, such as Mediterranean, Latin American, and African cuisines
• Less aggregation of high-sodium foods in building a dish

proteins, and pizza. “Breads, meat, and cheese are the big 3; that is where the sodium is, not in the fries,” says Smith.

### Produce Plus

“Interest in plant-based menu items is increasing,” says Deanne Brandstetter, RD, vice president of Nutrition and Wellness for Compass Group and cochair of the HMC. “Increasing fruits and vegetables, as well as adopting a new healthy market basket (whole grains, nuts, legumes, and healthy oils), improves the nutrition profile of many dishes while at the same time reduces sodium and calories,” reports Brandstetter.

Americans are sorely in need of help increasing fruit and vegetable consumption. According to a 2013 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the US adult’s average intake is 1.1 servings of fruit and 1.6 servings of vegetables a day.<sup>9</sup> Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative members all agree that increasing produce on menus is a trend that is here to stay, and 95% of members have added and will continue to add fruits and vegetables to the menu in creative ways that appeal to customers.<sup>10</sup> They report that guests are requesting information on nutrition and freshness, and 66% of them are using fresh produce in their menus (frozen, canned, and dried are also being used but much less than fresh). Salads, soups, and sides are the easiest items for boosting produce, with seafood, deli protein, burgers, and sandwiches being reported as more challenging. Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative members describe using seasonal produce, unique side dishes, and new ways to use produce in familiar dishes. Consumers are seeing more produce in items such as breakfast burritos, vegetable fajitas, grilled vegetable salads, omelets, flatbreads, and pizzas.

One vegetable that is a star in the culinary world is mushrooms because they are so easy to blend with ground meats. Mushrooms are rich source of umami. A Japanese word for savory; umami is transmitted through glutamate receptors on the tongue and in the mouth. Umami has been described as the fifth taste, joining salty, sweet, bitter, and sour. When used for a portion of ground meat in anything from burgers to meatballs to tacos, the addition of mushrooms significantly reduces the calories, fat, and sodium (and cost) of a dish.<sup>11</sup> The CIA is collaborating with the Foods for Health Institute at the University of California, Davis, on a project called the Healthy Flavors Research Initiative to test consumer preferences for different ratios of mushrooms and meat mixtures in traditional meat-based dishes.<sup>12</sup> “Using mushrooms not only reduces calories, fat, and cholesterol in meat dishes, but it also adds and enhances flavors meeting the desires of consumers for a healthier nutrition profile and a great-tasting dish,” says Amy Myrdal Miller, MS, RD, senior director of Programs and Culinary Nutrition at the CIA and co-principal investigator on the Healthy Flavors Research Initiative. “The umami in mush-

rooms also allows chefs and home cooks to use less added salt and still create appealing flavors in foods that combine meat and mushrooms” says Myrdal Miller. This research effort highlights the commitment that food scientists, chefs, culinary nutritionists, and commodity groups, such as the Mushroom Council, have in bringing delicious and nutritious creations to diners.

Table 4 identifies some of the innovative menu incorporating fruits and vegetables produced by HMC members.

### Reducing Calories

Overweight and obesity continue to be a serious threat to the nation’s health. Data from 2009 to 2010 revealed that more than one-third of adults (35.7%) and 16.9% of children and adolescents are obese; triple the rate from just 1 generation ago.<sup>13</sup> Curbing obesity involves a multipronged approach, and the foodservice industry needs to be part of the solution. Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative members are tackling this effort through decreasing portion sizes, decreasing caloric density (primarily by increasing use of fruits and vegetables), and developing high flavor profiles by strategic use of traditional indulgence ingredients in smaller amounts in recipe development.

Stan Frankenthaler, vice president of Global Product Innovation and executive chef at Dunkin’ Brands, shares that they “recently celebrated the fifth anniversary of the launch of Dunkin’ Donuts’ DDSMART menu featuring better-for-you food and beverages, including coffee and espresso beverages, teas, reduced-fat flavored cream cheeses, egg white breakfast sandwiches, and more. The menu has expanded over the past 5 years to provide even more choices for our guests with products that have fewer than 400 calories.” The most recent addition to the menu is a turkey sausage breakfast sandwich with 390 calories that is sold nationwide.

Another strategy being adopted by many HMC member restaurants is offering smaller or half portions for a reduced price. Red Lobster offers wood-grilled fish, such as salmon, rainbow trout, and tilapia in half portions with equally healthy sides such as fresh broccoli, asparagus, or petite green beans. They also use a mix-and-match strategy so customers can split their order to include half-fried shrimp and half grilled or broiled to cut calories while allowing diners to choose their favorites that are “slightly” healthier.

### Beyond Quick-Service Restaurants

Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative members are also involved in volume foodservice beyond restaurants. Perhaps some of the biggest overhauls in volume feeding are coming from college and university campus dining. From commercial foodservice companies to university-run dining, college campuses from the east coast to the west coast and everywhere in between are finding that today’s college kids (and their parents) want healthy, tasty foods served around the clock with plenty of variety. The millennial generation

**TABLE 4** Innovative Menu Items Incorporating Fruits and Vegetables in Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative Member Menus<sup>a</sup>

Restaurant/Food Service Operator	Menu Item	Featured Fruits and/or Vegetables
Not Your Average Joe's	Veggie Burger (made with brown rice)	Black beans, caramelized onions, organic greens
Black Angus Steakhouse	Teriyaki Steak Lettuce Cups	Lettuce, pineapple pico de gallo
Panda Restaurant Group	Samurai Surf & Turf	Sweet red bell pepper, string beans
Cheesecake Factory	Chicken and Mushroom Lettuce Wraps	Shiitake mushrooms, green onions, water chestnuts, lettuce leaves
McDonald's	Premium Southwest Salad With Grilled Chicken	Mixed greens, fire-roasted corn, black beans, roasted tomatoes, poblano peppers
Uno's Chicago Grill	Harvest Vegetable Pizza on Five-Grain Crust	Cherry tomatoes, garlic, basil, peppers, spinach, broccoli, caramelized onions
Ruby Tuesday	Chicken Bella	Baby portabella mushrooms, artichokes, zucchini, spaghetti squash
IHOP	Kid's Whole Wheat Pancake With Blueberries Combo	Lightly sweetened blueberries
Panera Bread	Lemon Chicken Orzo Soup	Spinach, carrots, basil, lemon
Subway	Veggie Delite Sub	Lettuce, tomatoes, green peppers, onions
Cracker Barrel	Citrus Spice Rubbed Chicken Breast	Fresh pineapple relish, steamed broccoli, or seasonal vegetables
On the Border	Achiote Chicken Tacos	Grilled pineapple, roasted corn, pickled red onion, roasted red chili salsa

<sup>a</sup>Information gathered from restaurant and foodservice operators' Web sites.

(those in their late teens to early 30s) was raised on cell phones and technology, and a quick peak at campus dining Web sites shows the connectedness that today's students want. Online menus? Instant nutrition analysis of a meal? An app that tracks favorite foods and meals? Locally sourced foods and sustainability programs? Vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, organic foods? "Yes" is the answer that the millennials are looking for on college campuses and foodservice operators are delivering.

Campus dining has also changed to "reflect a more sustainable and local approach to purchasing, while at the same time the flavors are more global" says Ida Sheen, assistant director of culinary at the University of California, Berkeley, and HMC member. College campuses across the country are seeing a more diverse student body with varied cultural backgrounds. Combine that with the millennials attitude of "they want what they want when they want it, so our customers have high expectations for campus dining," reports Sheen.

Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative member and director of culinary operations at Harvard University, Martin Breslin, recognizes that today's students are "very food savvy and

are influenced by television cooking shows and the sport-like culinary programming" available on television and instant streaming on their mobile devices. "We involve our students in the menu process by surveying their preferences twice a year, through electronic feedback and student food committees," says Breslin. That feedback has led to menus that feature more ethnic dishes with bolder flavors such as chicken vindaloo, Korean barbecue, and za'atar spiced chicken.

Promoting healthy dining on campus has been an easy sell for Sheen and Breslin. At Harvard, healthy eating is promoted by reducing sodium by 30% in all residential dining recipes, serving complex carbohydrates next to simple carbs, and adding "aqua stations" serving still, sparkling, and ambient water next to the soda fountains along with a chart on the sweetness of beverages (the chart, How Sweet Is It? is available online from the Harvard School of Public Health at <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/how-sweet-is-it/>). "This simple step has resulted in a significant reduction in the consumption of sweetened beverages over a 3-year period," reports Breslin.

Sheen reports that for the last 7 years she has been serving a certified organic salad bar. “The all-you-care-to-eat salad bar is so popular that we have faculty and staff joining the student meal plan,” says Sheen. In 2012, she opened a retail location on campus that specializes in rotisserie free-range chicken, turkey, Portobello mushrooms, and tri-tip beef, all served with a variety of sides to balance healthy food choices with indulgent choices such as the ever popular macaroni and cheese.

## Healthy Kid’s Meals

Adults are not the only ones being offered healthy meals when eating away from home. Menus in school districts all over the country are experiencing a major shift in food offerings. Lisa Feldman, a certified research chef and director of culinary services for the Schools Division of Sodexo, knows a lot about pleasing the palates of kids. She works with chefs and dietitians in more than 500 school districts, providing menu and recipe solutions for school meals for elementary through high school students.

If you think parents and children are not responding to the healthy menu items being offered in schools, think again. “Parents are initially more responsive than kids to healthy nutrition because parents know more about good nutrition than ever before,” says Feldman. She adds that her team sees more fruits and vegetables and whole-grain products in brown-bag lunches brought to schools, and that makes it easier to incorporate those foods into school meals. “When kids eat whole-grain Goldfish snack crackers and are served pasta such as the Barilla Plus at home, it makes it easier for us to serve whole grains in schools because they are familiar and well-accepted foods,” adds Feldman. She has found that texture is a big issue for kids, so tricks such as blanching broccoli and adding it to macaroni and cheese so that the vegetable has a softer consistency and the dish is texturally cohesive makes a big difference in acceptability. Feldman says that “kids eat with their eyes and enjoy self-selection of food items,” so schools try to work that to their advantage by making entrée salads with fresh greens and offering salad bars with kid-sized pieces. “We encourage kids to select fruits and veggies by positioning them in the line so they are not an afterthought, and we right-size them by serving apple slices or orange quarters to be more appealing,” says Feldman. She also uses a little “stealth health” by adding more veggies to taco meat, meatloaf, or any ground meat entrée without advertising the veggie-meat ratio.

Probably the biggest change in school meals is that they reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of the students. Adults might be surprised to see curried or orange chicken, Mexican posole, or fish tacos on school menu, but kids enjoy foods that are part of their culture. “These cultural favorites are also a great way to add fruits and veggies... cabbage slaw

on a fish taco in a natural combination, and so are beans and chilies in Mexican stew, so these dishes are successful with kids who eat them at home or in a restaurant when out with their parents,” says Feldman.

There are still some challenges in feeding kids healthy meals at schools. “Some adults look at the menu items and say their kids won’t eat it, but we’ve found that is hard to understand what kids will and won’t eat if we don’t try,” says Feldman. She also adds that cost is a huge issue when dealing with federally funded programs such as school lunch. Couple price with seasonality and it is doubly challenging. “School is out in the peak growing season... corn and tomatoes are at their best in the summer when schools are not opened. Maybe we should close schools in the winter when fresh produce is limited,” jokes Feldman.

Kids eat at restaurants, too. In July 2011, the National Restaurant Association launched the Kids LiveWell Program.<sup>14</sup> Participating restaurants offer and promote menu items based on several health organizations’ nutrition recommendations. The goal of the initiative is to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables, lean protein, whole grains, and low-fat dairy, while limiting total calories, unhealthy fats, sugar, and sodium in kids’ meals. A team of registered dietitians works with restaurants to identify and validate menu choices that meet the Kids LiveWell criteria. More than 41 000 restaurants are currently participating. Their healthier menu items can be found on [HealthyDiningFinder.com](http://HealthyDiningFinder.com) and also via a free Kids LiveWell App.

This year, a Kids Recipe Challenge was created, and 2 HMC members were winners. Compass Chartwells (School Dining Service) won for its “Chix-N-Cheddar Snappy Jalapeno Wrap.” Qdoba’s Mexican Grill won for “Lil’ Pulled Pork Naked Burrito,” demonstrating the creativity among HMC members in developing healthy, delicious kid’s meals.<sup>15</sup>

## What’s in the Future?

Diners can expect more innovation from restaurant and foodservice operators as diners continue to want to eat “slightly healthier.” To be sure there will always be big burgers, fried chicken, and French fries served up, but diners have more options than ever before to eat healthy and delicious foods when eating away from home. Too often the media report only on the high-calorie, high-fat, high-sodium items on restaurant menus... we all remember the sound bite describing fettuccine alfredo as a “heart attack on a plate” back in 1994.<sup>16</sup> Rarely do we see headlines about healthy menu items.

The HMC plans to expand into other focus areas, including expanding kids’ menu choices, whole grains, healthy baking and desserts, and healthy fats and oils to rethink fried foods. Healthy Menus R&D Collaborative members and the CIA are moving the needle on healthy, delicious dining. It will be a great day for Americans when delicious dining is

synonymous with healthy dining, and we will not need 2 words to describe this culinary trend.

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