Muskogee Phoenix

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Dining out can still be healthy

Caprese Salad is one of the featured items at The Bite Market and Café, which offers lighter lunchtime fare according to owner Rebecka Wright.

It's no huge surprise that dining out regularly can add inches to the waistline.

Between enormous portions and calorie-dense menu items, it's easy to bust a reasonable calorie budget with one deep-fried appetizer.

That's not to say we should stop dining out. That's a significant part of social life for many people in the Muskogee area.

If we choose restaurants and menu items wisely, and don't gorge ourselves on oversized portions, dining out can offer healthy alternatives and variety that we might not prepare at home.

Restaurants that make healthy, delicious options readily available play an important role in creating a healthier community.

Consider these tips for making your restaurant experience a healthier one.

Look for restaurants that are "Certified Healthy."

Through the "Oklahoma Certified Healthy Restaurant" program, the Oklahoma Turning Point Council recognizes local restaurants, regional and national chains, and even worksite cafeterias that offer healthy options and environments.

Only one Muskogee restaurant in each of the past two years has applied for and earned the "Certified Healthy Restaurant" designation—China Express in 2011 and My Place BBQ in 2012.

Plenty of other Muskogee restaurants could earn the designation. Encourage your favorite restaurant to apply to be "Certified Healthy." The application is free online at http://okturningpoint.org/chp/chr/chr.html. It must be submitted by Nov. 1.

Try restaurants that offer interesting fruit and veggie options.

It's easy to get into a rut preparing and eating fruits and vegetables the same old way. Creative restaurant offerings can keep us from getting bored and maybe even inspire more creativity in our own kitchen.

The Bite Market and Café at 318 W. Broadway in Muskogee is open from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. weekdays. It features light lunch fare such as sandwiches, soups, salads, quiches and other tasty treats you won't find elsewhere.

The raw, shaved Brussels sprout salad is a delicious new take that includes sun-dried tomatoes, pine nuts, a hint of vinaigrette and even bacon crumbles if you like. It makes for a delicious entrée salad or side dish and proves that Brussels sprouts need not be drowned in butter nor cheese to be tasty.

"Most of our customers are pretty open-minded and appreciate the variety, like hummus, olives and prosciutto wrapped pears," said its owner, Rebecka Wright. "We try to do different seasonal side items, and I go to Arnold Fruit

Co. and the Muskogee Farmers' Market to seasonal fresh, local produce as much as I can."

Wright said that The Bite will never offer burgers and fries—other restaurants have that covered—and it doesn't even have a deep-fryer.

On the first Friday of the month, The Bite is open from 7 to 10 p.m. for an art show, live music, wine, coffee, hors d'oeuvres and dessert. And health-conscious catering services are also available.

The Bite is open to customer suggestions. If there's demand for a certain food that fits the approach of the café, Wright wants to hear about it and will strive to make it available.

Other ideas to keep healthy while dining out:

- Ask for a to-go box when your food arrives and plan to take a portion home. Or, get smaller-sized entrees or order off the kids' menu when healthy options are available.
- Share an entrée.
- Ask for meats and veggies to be prepared in a healthy way, such as grilled or steamed; request sauces and dressings on the side; and limit how much free bread and chips you eat.
- Substitute healthy sides such as steamed broccoli for traditional fries or loaded mashed potatoes.

Get and give recommendations. Word of mouth is a great way to learn about healthy dining out options. Email your favorite healthy restaurant menu choice or tip to lisa@muskogeewellness.org. I'll compile a list to put online at http://www.MuskogeeWellness.org and http://www.Facebook.com/MuskogeeWellness.

By encouraging and rewarding healthier options when dining out, we can help urge more local restaurants to make the healthy choice also the easy choice.

Our taste buds and our waistbands will thank us.

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