

A Healthy Appetite

We analyzed the menus of the five most frequented chains in our survey to ferret out ways you may get fooled into making unhealthy choices—and give you sensible fixes

The nutrition experts at Consumer Reports' food testing lab reviewed the nutrition information for lunch and dinner dishes at the five sit-down restaurant chains that respondents to our current survey visited most often. In order, they were Applebee's, Olive Garden, The Cheesecake Factory, Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, and IHOP. The nutrition information came from menus we picked up at restaurant locations in our area or from the companies' websites. Our goal: to identify the meals that a health-conscious diner could feel comfortable ordering. Ideally, those are dishes with about a third of a day's nutrition intake, based on a 2,000-calorie diet—at or below 670 calories,

22 grams of fat, 7 grams of saturated fat, and 770 mg of sodium.

We discovered options at each chain that met at least one of those criteria, but scoping them out took some digging. ("Best Selling vs. Better for You," on the facing page, lists our picks.) "To make informed choices, consumers who want to eat more healthfully need more nutrition information than they can find on most menus," says Ellen Klosz, who conducted our review. "And even when it is available, it can be a challenge for consumers to interpret it." We focused on three common consumer-confusing problems and found the fixes that can help you eat healthier anywhere.

FOOLED **Misleading meal names.**

If you don't eat out very often, what you pick might not carry as much weight. But if, like one-third of the people we surveyed, you eat dinner at a restaurant at least once a week, you really have to make smart choices—and that's not easy, says Lisa Sasson, M.S., R.D., clinical associate professor of nutrition at New York University.

"Even menu items that sound healthy may still be high in calories," Sasson says. Take the Eggplant Parmigiana at Olive Garden. Eggplant is a veggie, so it seems better than Chicken Parmigiana, right? But each has 1,060 calories. And though you probably wouldn't be surprised to see that

the Bacon Temptation Omelette at IHOP has 1,080 calories, would you think that the Garden Omelette has 840?

Salads aren't always a great choice, either, "especially when they have creamy dressings and little crunchy things on top," says Julie Downs, Ph.D., associate professor of decision science at Carnegie Mellon University. "Sometimes a salad can have as many calories as the hamburger next to it—or more." That can be the case at Applebee's: The Oriental Grilled Chicken Salad has 1,290 calories vs. 780 in the Classic Burger.

FIX
Look for the light.
"Most of the dishes we recommend come from the chains' lighter menus," Klosz says. "But we also chose dishes from the regular menus that came closest to meeting our nutritional criteria." Fortunately, lighter menus nowadays have more to offer than plain green salads or cottage cheese and fruit.

At press time, The Cheesecake Factory had around 40 dishes on its SkinnyLicious menu. We also found six Lighter Fare dishes at Applebee's, eight Wholesome Fixin's on Cracker Barrel's lunch and dinner

menus, five Lighter Italian Fare meals at Olive Garden, and two IHOP Simple & Fit dishes, both centered on eggs. And if you're eating somewhere that doesn't have a lighter menu, split an entrée with a friend or ask your waiter to box half of your meal before bringing it to the table.

FOOLED
Too little information.
Applebee's, The Cheesecake Factory, IHOP, and Olive Garden list calorie counts on their menus. Cracker Barrel does for its Wholesome Fixin's dishes. That's helpful, but it's not enough: "Lower calorie" doesn't automatically mean healthier. "A healthy meal is also lower in fat, saturated fat, and sodium," Klosz says.

You can often find additional nutrition information on a restaurant's website. Applebee's, IHOP, and Olive Garden all list at least carbohydrates, fat, saturated fat, fiber, protein, sodium, and sugars online.

FIX
Research what you'll order beforehand.
Check chain restaurants' websites in advance, review the available nutrition information, and pick one or two dishes to choose from. Not only

can you base your selection on more information than you'll see on a menu (and avoid scrolling through your phone at the table), but you also might be less swayed by high-calorie options if you aren't hungry when you make your decision, according to a recent study by Downs and her colleagues.

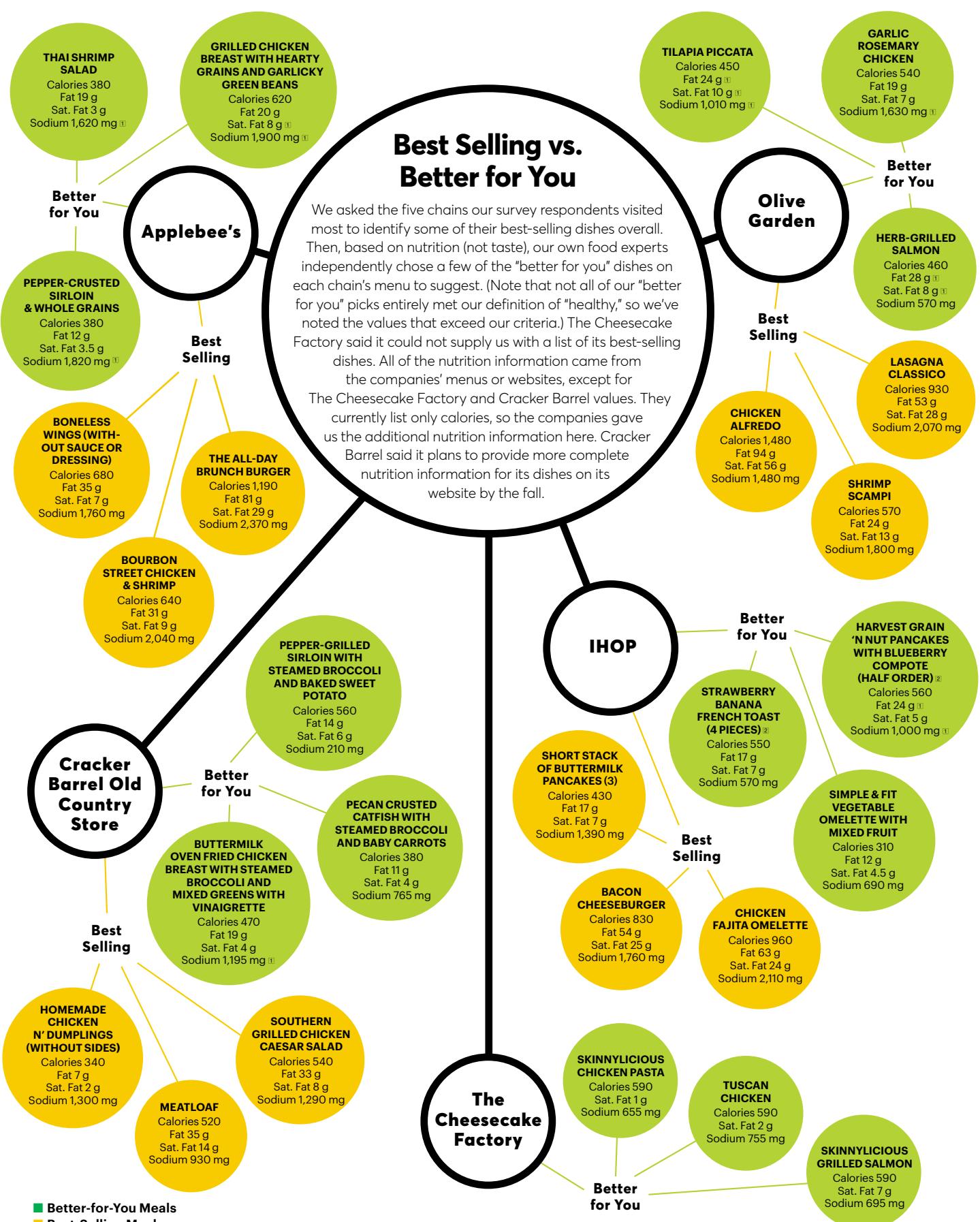
FOOLED
Sneaky sodium.
About 90 percent of Americans get more than the recommended daily maximum of 2,300 mg, and a good chunk comes from restaurant food. And if you think "lighter" dishes are less salty, think again. Four of six Lighter Fare entrées at Applebee's have more than 2,000 mg of sodium. With 2,450 mg of sodium, the Lighter Fare Shrimp Wonton Stir-Fry alone exceeds the daily maximum.

FIX
Set a sodium strategy. Anything with cheese or a sauce is practically guaranteed to be a sodium bomb, Klosz says. Request sauces and dressings on the side, and use just a little bit, which may save you calories and fat, too. Also try simply asking your server whether the kitchen can cut the salt on your dish.
—Julia Calderone



Best Selling vs. Better for You

We asked the five chains our survey respondents visited most to identify some of their best-selling dishes overall. Then, based on nutrition (not taste), our own food experts independently chose a few of the "better for you" dishes on each chain's menu to suggest. (Note that not all of our "better for you" picks entirely met our definition of "healthy," so we've noted the values that exceed our criteria.) The Cheesecake Factory said it could not supply us with a list of its best-selling dishes. All of the nutrition information came from the companies' menus or websites, except for The Cheesecake Factory and Cracker Barrel values. They currently list only calories, so the companies gave us the additional nutrition information here. Cracker Barrel said it plans to provide more complete nutrition information for its dishes on its website by the fall.



■ Better-for-You Meals
■ Best-Selling Meals

⁽¹⁾ Value exceeds our criteria for healthy meal.

⁽²⁾ There weren't many options at IHOP that met our nutrition criteria. So we customized the order for these dishes, and the values are for just part of the meal.