Snacking Delusions Destroyed by NYC Calorie-Posting Law

All This Nutritional Info Could Change the Way We Eat

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"I was at Coney Island and I almost died!" my friend Ari was saying.

No, he didn't almost drown. He almost ordered the chili cheese fries at Nathan's. Then he saw on the menu board that this beachside treat was 1,444 calories (for the large) and -- aieeee!

That's what is happening these days all over New York City, where local law now requires restaurants with 15 or more outlets to post their sometimes shocking calorie counts. It is not enough to provide this information at a kiosk or on a brochure. Calories have to be posted right up there on the signs where the prices are, and in the same-size type. This can get a little confusing -- is that muffin $3.20 or 320 calories? But the real issue is that this info is changing the way our city eats.

And soon, possibly, the way the rest of America eats, too.

Consider the fact that New York was the first city to ban trans-fats. It was also, after California (natch), one of the first places to ban smoking in bars.

So what happens if the rest of America adopts our calorie law, too? (Assuming it remains a law; an appeal is working its way through the courts.) What would a brutally honest fast-food landscape look like?

"It looks scary!" said Jessica Alvarado, a social worker contemplating her afternoon treat at Dunkin' Donuts. Peeking at the damage her chocolate-frosted cake doughnut would inflict -- 330 calories -- she told her friend, "There goes dinner." She will only allow herself a salad for supper. But she wasn't willing to give up her doughnut.

Others are.

"I used to go to Dunkin' Donuts all the time," said Randy Zayas, an ironworker. When the new signage popped up at the beginning of May, however, he suddenly realized, "My breakfast was too much calories." He switched to 180-calorie Jamba Lights at Jamba Juice each morn.

You might think that people worried about their weight would have already availed themselves of the
calorie info on the web. You'd be wrong. Casual dieters don't seem to have bothered with it, and even serious dieters are shocked when the calorie counts stare them in the face.

"I used to check the Starbucks information online," says Mistina Picciano, president of Market It Write. She thought she knew the score. Then, two weeks ago, she says, "I was horrified to learn that the ... Frappuccino I had enjoyed guilt-free in New Jersey -- no signs -- had 590 calories!"

Surprises like that are precisely the reason for the postings, said Cathy Nonas at the New York City Department of Health. Consumers are way off in their calorie calculations. She herself was shocked to learn how many calories there are in some casual-dining appetizers and coffeehouse cakes -- and she's a dietitian.

Restaurants are understandably upset that this law makes their signs look ugly and cost more, especially since they already made their nutritional info easily available. But most upsetting of all must be these newly enlightened, frightened customers.

"When I started seeing the calories, I stopped getting the pastries," said 22-year-old law student Nadya Kramerova. So did research analyst Patricia Coronado and attorney Joe Molloy, all folks I interviewed separately at my local Starbucks. The barista there said pastry sales were off 15%-20%. (Biscotti sales are up.)

So maybe this will make Starbucks and the other eateries start offering more-healthful alternatives, or smaller portions. Or maybe we'll just get used to the signs, like the surgeon general's warning. Or maybe we'll all eat puffed rice with our lattes. No matter what, something's gotta give.

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