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Taking Nanny to dinner

Some restaurants are replacing preaching about calories with smaller portions

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Expanding waistlines are the price Americans pay for the horn of plenty. The nanny lurking in the shadow of big government reckoned that she can help the greedy shed the extra pounds by ordering restaurants to offer menus that clearly label nutritional content. Experience shows it probably won't work, and coaxing diners to order smaller portions might.

Obamacare brought with it a mandate that certain restaurants display nutrition charts to teach patrons to count calories. The Food and Drug Administration announced in March the rule would be delayed until 2017, a temporary victory for grocery and convenience stores that argue that their focus on variety would obligate them to record nutritional content for hundreds or even thousands of products. Health advocates decry the delay, but their beef is really with human nature. Most of us have grown accustomed to an unfortunate "see-food" diet — when we see food, we want it.

More than 78 million American adults are obese, a kinder, gentler way to say "fat," according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Obesity sets many on course for heart disease, stroke, Type 2 diabetes and cancer. Treatments cost the nation as much as \$210 billion annually, and the overweight spend 42 percent more on doctor and hospital bills than their healthy neighbors do. Foodies pay dearly for their haute cuisine.

A policy analysis by Cato Institute published in April sets out just how difficult it is for Americans to alter their dining habits, even with the help of food labels. The study examined the effects of existing menu mandates on nearly 300,000 respondents who lived in 30 large American cities between 2003 and 2012. "We find that the impact of such labeling effects on obesity and other health-related outcomes is trivial, and, to the extent it exists, it fades rapidly," says Aaron Yelowitz, an economics professor at the University of Kentucky.

The survey found that use of a calorie chart by a typical 5-foot-10-inch, 190-lb. man would result in a weight reduction of only eight ounces. "For virtually all groups explored, the long-run impact on body weight is essentially zero," the study concluded. "People have preferences that are more or less fixed, and for the most part, people enjoy cheeseburgers more than broccoli." Most dieters suffer not from a lack of information, but for a lack of willpower.

If facts about food won't persuade Americans to watch what they eat, reducing the size of portions might. The diameter of the average dinner plate has grown by an inch and a half since the 1950s, observes Bee Wilson in *The London Guardian*. "Just because we are eating off these great expanses of china does not, of course, mean that we have to serve ourselves bigger

portions. But as it happens, we usually do.” Replacing a plate the width of a garbage-can lid with one the size of a frisbee might persuade overeaters to cut back. Some restaurants are reducing supersized servings. McDonald’s has begun test-marketing a Mac Jr., a downsized version of its belly-hefty Big Mac, and Oreos now come in a “thin” variety with fewer calories.

Prosperity has increased the girth of the average American, but nobody likes a government nanny, and her nutritional menus have been a bust. Maybe the kitchen can cook up a way to restrain the appetites of gluttons and gourmands.