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NOVEMBER 24, 2010 4:00 P.M. **The Food Police Take Aim**

Providing nutritional information is one thing. Trying to outlaw the occasional splurge is quite another.

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As people all across this nation prepare to loosen their belts and load their dinner plates high with delicious holiday fare, public-interest groups are busy trying to send us all on a collective guilt trip for unhealthy eating habits.

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True, the food-police killjoys at the Center for Science in the Public Interest haven't yet taken aim at Mom's stuffed [turkey](#) and candied yams. But they do target restaurant meals they think should be off limits. This year's edition of the CSPI's annual finger-wag, Xtreme Eating 2010, cites such familiar villains as The Cheesecake Factory, P. F. Chang's, the D.C. burger mecca (and Obama favorite) Five Guys, and other chain restaurants for offering high-calorie menu items.

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Thank God for the CSPI! I mean, without this helpful list, how would Americans know that making a habit of consuming a Five Guys burger with fries and a non-diet drink might be bad for them? How would simple-minded Americans begin to understand that something called the "Chocolate Tower Truffle Cake" might be a little heavy on calories and fat? I mean, without the CSPI, people might mistake The Cheesecake Factory's cream-and-bacon-laden Pasta Carbonara for [health](#) food.

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As my eleven-year-old niece would put it: Duh!

Of course, some of the information on the list is indeed jarring. Who doesn't cringe when seeing the 2,000-plus calorie totals for some of these meals? But what the food police at the CSPI don't seem to understand is that people don't eat this rich food every day. For most people, treating themselves to a high-calorie restaurant meal is an occasional indulgence.

And while the CSPI implies that these restaurant meals are responsible for America's obesity problem (and in truth, obesity rates have stayed level for ten years), a recent study released by the Cato Institute found that eating in restaurants has a negligible effect on obesity. The authors found that the calorie difference among those who eat out regularly and those who do not is "too small to [account](#) for more than a trivial fraction of the increase in [Body Mass Index] observed over the past several decades."

If the CSPI were releasing its lists simply to help inform consumers that some restaurant food is high in calories and saturated fat, it would be providing a helpful service to the dining consumer. But the CSPI's goals go way beyond informing the public; the CSPI wants to browbeat these restaurants into serving only healthy foods.

The CSPI has a long history of beating up on the restaurant industry. It has promoted policies requiring restaurants to provide calorie counts and other nutrition information on menus and poster boards. More recently, the CSPI heralded provisions in the health-care bill requiring chain restaurants with 20 or more locations to display the calorie count and other nutritional information for each menu item. While many restaurants already provide this information voluntarily, the health-care bill will mandate it for all.

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