

Restaurant Nutrition Draws Focus of First Lady

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#) and [WILLIAM NEUMAN](#)

WASHINGTON — After wrapping her arms around the retail giant Wal-Mart and trying to cajole food makers into producing [nutrition](#) labels that are easier to understand, [Michelle Obama](#), the first lady and a healthy-eating advocate, has her sights set on a new target: the nation's restaurants.

A team of advisers to Mrs. Obama has been holding private talks over the past year with the National Restaurant Association, a trade group, in a bid to get restaurants to adopt her goals of smaller portions and children's meals that include healthy offerings like carrots, apple slices and milk instead of French fries and soda, according to White House and industry officials.

The discussions are preliminary, and participants say they are nowhere near an agreement like the one Mrs. Obama announced recently with Wal-Mart to lower prices on fruits and vegetables and to reduce the amount of fat, sugar and salt in its foods. But they reveal how assertively she is working to prod the industry to sign on to her agenda.

On Tuesday, Mrs. Obama will begin a three-day publicity blitz to spotlight "Let's Move!," her campaign to reduce childhood [obesity](#), which was announced one year ago this week.

She will introduce a public service announcement, appear on the "Today" show and deliver a speech in Atlanta promoting gardening and healthy-eating programs.

But as she uses her public platform to persuade children to eat healthier and exercise more, Mrs. Obama and her team are also quietly pressing the levers of industry and government. Over the past year she has become involved in many aspects of the nation's dietary habits, exerting her influence over nutrition policy.

Her team has worked with beverage makers to design soda cans with calorie counts and is deeply involved in a major remake of the government's most recognizable tool for delivering its healthy-eating message: the food pyramid.

Mrs. Obama persuaded Congress to require schools to include more fruits and vegetables in the lunches they offer, and she encouraged lawmakers to require restaurants to print nutrition information on menus, a provision that wound up in [President Obama](#)'s landmark health care law.

"They really want a cooperative relationship with the food industry, and they're looking at industry to come up with ideas," said Lanette R. Kovachi, corporate dietitian for Subway, the nation's second-largest

restaurant chain in terms of revenue. She said she had taken part in at least four conference calls with Mrs. Obama's food advisers.

But in seeking partnerships with industry, Mrs. Obama runs a risk. While nutritionists and public health advocates give her high marks for putting healthy eating on the national agenda, many worry that she will be co-opted by companies rushing to embrace her without offering meaningful change.

"Can the food industry play a responsible role in the obesity epidemic? The answer isn't no," said Dr. David Ludwig, the director of the Optimal Weight for Life program at Children's Hospital in Boston. "The point is that the best initiatives can be subverted for special interest, and it's important to be vigilant when we form partnerships with industry."

White House officials say Mrs. Obama has believed from the start that bringing industry to the negotiating table is critical to achieving her long-range goal of eliminating childhood obesity within a generation.

[Melody Barnes](#), Mr. Obama's domestic policy adviser and the chairwoman of a presidential task force on obesity, said industry has been eager to work with the White House. But Mrs. Obama does not lend her name to any plan or program, she said, unless it meets the recommendations of a task force report issued in May.

"If someone wants her support, we take a hard look at the data and the research to determine if the commitment meets our standards," Ms. Barnes said. "And if the result is good for business as well as for the health of American children, we see that as a win-win."

Still, Mrs. Obama has been treading carefully. As part of her anti-obesity campaign, she has called on food makers to design clear "front-of-package" labels to warn consumers about ingredients like salt, sugar and fat. But after months of negotiations with the White House, the companies insisted on a plan that would also spotlight healthy ingredients, like [calcium](#) or fiber.

The administration thought the new labels confusing, and they do not meet recommendations in a recent report by experts at the nonpartisan [Institute of Medicine](#). When the food companies announced the plan, the White House put out a tepid statement calling it "a significant first step." Mrs. Obama said nothing.

"She could have just added this to her list of things done, but she said, 'Not good enough,'" said Dr. David Kessler, a commissioner of the [Food and Drug Administration](#) under President [Bill Clinton](#). "It was not done in a confrontational manner; she didn't blast them, but she sent a very clear signal that it didn't meet the mark."

That, however, did not stop food industry executives from invoking Mrs. Obama's name when they rolled out the labeling initiative last month and said they were responding to her call for action.

Mrs. Obama's approach to the new labels contrasts starkly with her embrace of Wal-Mart's plan to reformulate foods and lower prices on fruits and vegetables — a plan that carried political risks of its own. The conservative pundit [Rush Limbaugh](#) maintained that Mrs. Obama had “somehow bullied or pressured” the company, while liberals complained that she given her imprimatur to a company that her husband once criticized for its labor practices.

And some food industry experts say Wal-Mart, not Mrs. Obama, was the big winner. The company has long wanted to expand into urban areas, but often faces opposition in cities where unionized labor is powerful, like New York. Mrs. Obama's endorsement may make it easier for the company to gain a foothold; she strongly supports bringing fruits and vegetables to so-called food deserts, low-income neighborhoods where healthy offerings are often expensive and scarce.

“Wal-Mart is very clever, very political,” said Walter Olson, who writes about food regulation for the [Cato Institute](#), a libertarian research organization in Washington. “I think Wal-Mart has taken a list of things it was probably considering doing anyway and managed to get the first lady's endorsement in a way that its shareholders will be laughing all the way down the produce aisle.”

Wal-Mart was already planning its initiative when Mrs. Obama became involved. But Leslie Dach, the company's executive in charge of the project, said Mrs. Obama made it “stronger and ultimately smarter” by demanding that Wal-Mart examine its own progress. “We think she and her staff have approached this very seriously, rooted in the science,” Mr. Dach said.

Mrs. Obama's outreach to restaurants is still in its early stages. A National Restaurant Association spokeswoman, Sue Hensley, called it “a positive dialogue” and said her group and Mrs. Obama had “the same goals in mind.”

In a speech to the association last fall, Mrs. Obama made those goals clear. Noting that research has shown that children consume more [saturated fat](#) and less fiber and calcium when they eat out, she challenged restaurant owners to change their menus, recipes and marketing practices to “give parents the confidence to know that they can go into any restaurant in this country and choose a genuinely healthy meal for their kids.”

Dr. Kessler said it would take years to gauge the effect of Mrs. Obama's efforts.

“At the end of the day, this is about changing how we as a country look at food,” he said. “The food industry will change when consumers change what they want, and she's worked hard to help us look at food differently. Long term, that's what's important.”