

First lady, Wal-Mart reach pact on nutrition

Seal will mark healthful foods

By Stephen Dinan

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A day after serving a calorie-laden state dinner to Chinese President Hu Jintao, first lady Michelle Obama announced a deal Thursday with Wal-Mart, the country's largest retailer and grocery store, to reduce sodium, cut prices on fruits and vegetables, and label healthful foods to guide customers.

Wal-Mart and Mrs. Obama dubbed their agreement a "nutrition charter," and it dovetails with Mrs. Obama's own effort as first lady to push Americans to eat better, particularly when it comes to children.

"This nutrition charter promises a real change that can have a fundamental impact in how our kids eat, you see, because when parents have the information they need about the products they buy, that puts them back in charge, so they can make good decisions for their families," she said.

Under the agreement, Wal-Mart said it committed to cutting sodium content of thousands of packaged foods by 25 percent by 2015, and to cutting the cost of fruits, vegetables and healthier packaged foods. The company will also develop a seal it will use to mark healthful foods so consumers can sort through their options.

Wal-Mart is not the first to take those kinds of steps, but as the country's largest grocer, observers said the company could have a significant effect on obesity.

"Wal-Mart has the power to influence the choices of both consumers and suppliers, and the company's plans should push both in healthier directions," said Charles J. Courtemanche, an assistant professor of economics at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, who has looked at Wal-Mart's effect on obesity. "If Wal-Mart shoppers respond to incentives, they will substitute away from junk food and toward fresh produce, at least to some degree, when the latter becomes cheaper."

The partnership between Mrs. Obama and Wal-Mart represents an about-face from the presidential campaign, when her husband criticized the chain and said he wouldn't shop there because it wasn't union-friendly. Days after Mr. Obama's criticism, Mrs. Obama resigned her position on the board of a food company that supplied Wal-Mart.

But White House press secretary Robert Gibbs said Thursday that "lots has happened since 2007."

"I think the first lady was proud to stand with the country's largest retailer. They've taken some dramatic steps in how they're dealing with food and how they're marketing food and packaging," Mr. Gibbs said.

Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said the trend in stores is toward healthful options, and Wal-Mart may just be agreeing to do what it would have done anyway, though this way it secures the headlines that come from teaming up with Mrs. Obama.

He also said the deal could actually help Wal-Mart clear the way to opening up stores in some places where unions have blocked them.

"Now they've maneuvered things so the first lady is saying, 'Oh, you naughty people, don't stand in the way as Wal-Mart opens up stores in underserved areas,'" he said.

With nearly 3,000 Wal-Mart supercenters in the U.S., the company lays claim to being the biggest grocery store chain in the country, which gives it immense power to shape eating habits — for good or bad.

A study by Mr. Courtemanche found that when a Wal-Mart supercenter moved into a county, the body weights of individuals rose by an average of 1.5 pounds and the county's obesity rate rose by 2 percentage points. Mr. Courtemanche attributed the increases to Wal-Mart's low prices, particularly on unhealthy processed foods.

Obesity is a growing issue in the U.S., and Mrs. Obama has made tackling it her centerpiece campaign as first lady in her "Let's Move" initiative.

She has tried to lead by example by planting a kitchen garden at the White House, regularly visiting schools to highlight good practices and even talking publicly about her efforts to change her two daughters' eating and activity patterns.

That's left them open to scrutiny of their own eating habits — including Mr. Obama's penchant for cheeseburgers.

On Wednesday night, just before the Thursday morning Wal-Mart announcement, the Obamas faced another such moment when they greeted the Chinese president and more than 200 other state dinner guests with a multicourse extravaganza: pear salad with goat cheese; lobster with glazed carrots and mushrooms; lemon sorbet; rib-eye beef and a double-stuffed potato; and apple pie and vanilla ice cream for dessert. The dinner courses were paired with three wines.

Mrs. Obama's press office didn't respond to a message seeking comment on the health value, but a back-of-the-envelope calculation showed the meal clocked in at 1,500 calories, or 75% of a 2,000-calorie-a-day diet.

One nutritionist said if diners sampled each item, it could have topped 2,000 calories.

Mitzi Dulan, co-author of the book "The All-Pro Diet," said it's OK to splurge on an occasional indulgence as long as it's balanced out with exercise and other diet choices. Still, she said, there were some options the White House could have chosen to make the menu more healthful.

"It would have been nice to have fresh berries with the ice cream or an apple crumble made with whole-wheat flour. I would have preferred sweet potatoes and steamed spinach vs. creamed," she said. "The salad sounds fabulous, as does the lobster. The dessert would be better if in a mini portion."

In announcing the dinner, the White House said the meal reflected a commitment to "sustainability, affordability and healthy, delicious foods." The meal's food was taken from across the country — Idaho trout, Massachusetts shrimp, and thyme, rosemary and sage from the White House's own kitchen garden, which Mrs. Obama started two years ago.

Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition and public health at New York University, said the menu looked "absolutely delicious."

"Every course includes a fruit or vegetable, and the menu looks like it is constructed from fresh, typically American ingredients," she said. "The main health issue here is portion size. Is that rib-eye 2 to 3 ounces or 23? There's nothing wrong with steak if the portions are small. And this is a state dinner, not everyday fare."

She said the Obamas showed leadership with the menu by emphasizing fruits and vegetables, and American products.

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