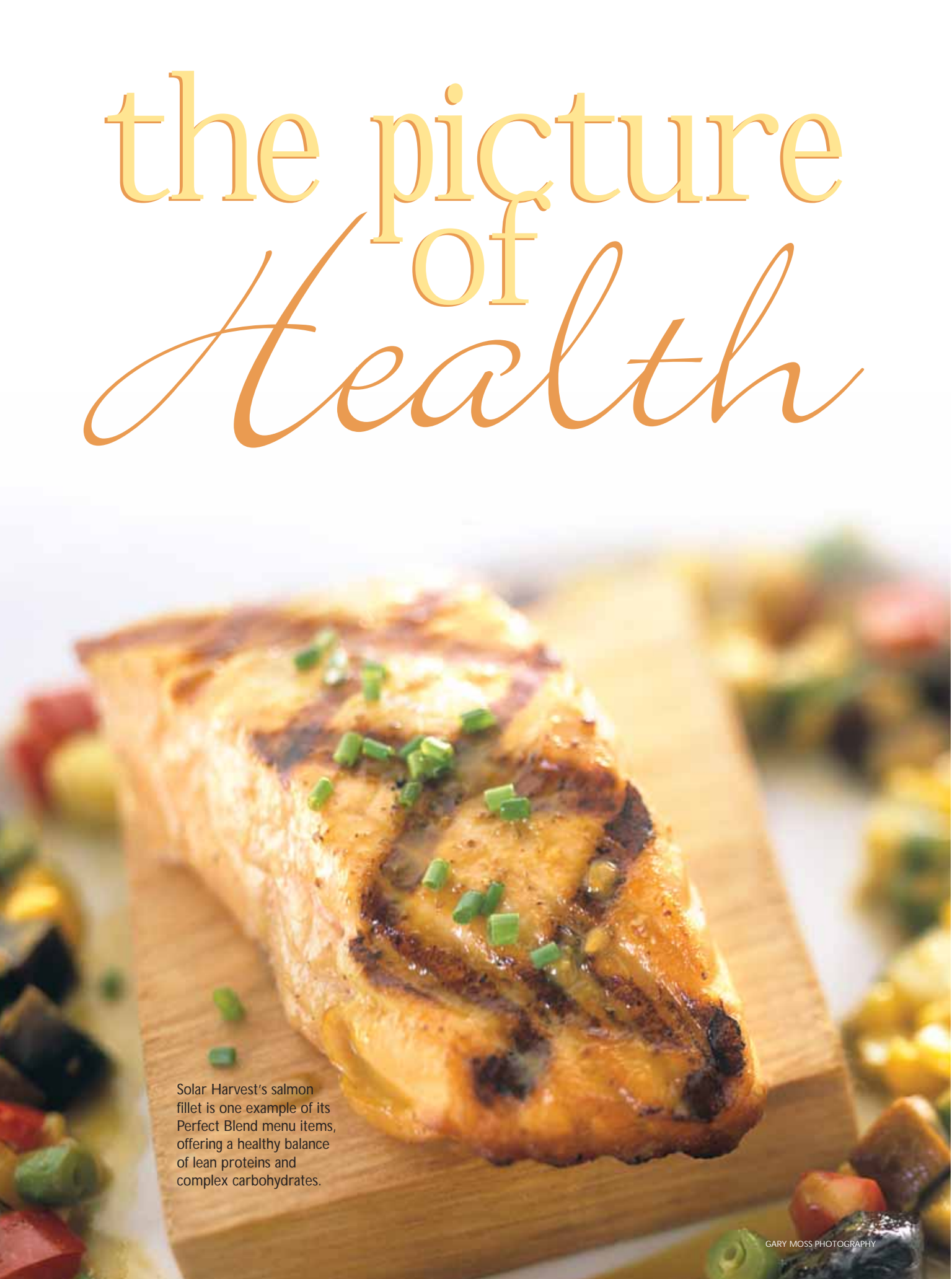


the picture of *Health*



Solar Harvest's salmon fillet is one example of its Perfect Blend menu items, offering a healthy balance of lean proteins and complex carbohydrates.

Successful operators are finding tasteful new ways — including symbols and color codes — to flag healthful menu items

BY JOANNE LICHTEN, PH.D, RD

If the Healthy Lifestyles and Prevention (HeLP) bill now before Congress passes, restaurants may no longer be exempt from the nutritional labeling required on packaged goods since 1994. Introduced by Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) in May 2005, the HeLP bill seeks to mandate nutritional labeling on chain-restaurant menus.

This kind of information on the menu could be a boon to both restaurateurs and their customers, if it's done right. Because, while consumers don't like being hit over the head with health messages on menus, they do want to know more about what they're eating. According to data gathered in May 2005 by Technomic, 35 percent of consumers want government to regulate foodservice, 67 percent want nutrition information readily available in restaurants, and 79 percent say they want restaurants to promote "better-for-you" foods more actively. Clearly, talk of health does have a place on our nation's menus, but how do you talk to consumers about health without creating the perception of compromised flavor?

"The biggest obstacle in calling a menu item 'healthy' is that the consumer perceives all the fun and flavorful stuff has been taken out," says Stephen Kalil, senior manager of culinary innovation at Chili's Grill & Bar, a Brinker International concept.

The challenge for operators is to give consumers nutritional information on the menu in language that conveys good health and good flavor. Strategies have included using those little red hearts denoting "heart-healthy" options, segregating healthful options into a

special menu section and presenting an entirely separate menu for health-minded customers. Some brave operations have dedicated their entire menus to healthful cuisine. All these tactics have had varying degrees of success.

DEDICATED TO BETTER HEALTH

Over the past two decades, restaurants that planned their entire concept around better health have come and gone. D'Lites, a diet-conscious fast-food chain that grew to nearly 100 outlets in 1985, filed for bankruptcy protection in 1987. HeartWise Express, a quick-serve restaurant in Chicago, opened in 1996 but is no longer with us. We can also add Healthy Bites Grill, Fat-Free Arties and Eatopia Express to the list of the demised.

"Restaurants with an entirely healthy menu strategy can work on a small scale," notes Dave Jenkins, president of foodservice, NPD Group. "But it gets very difficult when you want to grow. Consumer appeal is limited, and the execution that made it special with one or two units is not easily replicated.

"Menu items sell better when they aren't labeled as 'healthy.' When people see a reference to health on the menu, they get suspicious and think, 'I've been fooled in the past; I'm not going to get fooled again,'" adds Jenkins.

A self-limiting market makes it difficult for health-oriented concepts to succeed, observes Bob Goldin, executive vice president of Technomic.

"Healthy means different things to different people," he says, "but in general, [health-focused menus'] biggest failing is too narrow an appeal."

He notes that Technomic's research into customer satisfaction with top restaurant chains' healthful and nutritious offerings reveals that consumers want options.

"Top chains meet this demand by offering a wide variety of menu choices, preparation styles and portion sizes," says Goldin.

Successful chain-menu developers are finding ways to present healthful and universally appealing menus

quick-take

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ New techniques and terminology for talking about nutritionally sound menu items
- ▶ Success stories from operators leading the way toward more healthful menus
- ▶ Fresh, natural, organic, whole-grain: descriptors that say healthful and flavorful



ROCK CREEK

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TECHNOMIC, MAY 2005

or menu options, and customers are becoming slowly convinced that they don't have to pay a flavor penalty when choosing nutritionally sound food in restaurants.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Evos, whose name is short-hand for more "evolved" fast food, began in 1994 and has managed to grow to three Florida locations offering low-fat burgers, baked fries and all-fruit smoothies. And the 14-unit Massachusetts-based Fresh City promotes fresh-picked, fresh-cooked and prepared fresh-to-order food "built on great taste and full of flavor, not fat."

"At Fresh City, you'll find fresh food and fresh ideas," says Paul Hersek, director of sales and marketing. "We use only natural sirloin

and chicken. All the vegetables come in whole and are hand sliced in the stores. And your food is prepared fresh for you at each of the stations. Instead of having to give your requests to the order taker, you get to talk directly to the chef. So, our customers not only have choice, they have control."

Fresh City's website and kiosks in its new restaurants provide nutritional information as well as suggestions on menu choices to fit diners' lifestyles.

"For example," Hersek points out, "if you're looking for something under 500 calories, we have 31 different menu suggestions that provide all the variety that our menu has to offer, along with great flavors."

AVOIDING THE H-WORD

O'Naturals, with four restaurants in northern New England and plans to franchise, offers antibiotic- and hormone-free meat (including bison), dairy-free products, primarily organic ingredients and vegan and vegetarian selections. Its signature flatbread is made with organic flour. While natural sodas are available, no artificially sweetened diet beverages are offered, and the naturally calorie-free stevia is offered for the coffee and tea service.

President Mac McCabe explains that avoiding the "health" word is key to O'Naturals' success.

"We don't use the word 'healthy' because it means different things to different people," he says. "For some people, it means vegetarian, and we serve meat. For others, healthy eating includes no-sugar foods, such as diet soda, which we don't serve because it contains chemicals.

"The most important flavor at O'Naturals," says McCabe, "comes from the ingredients themselves — not chemical embellishments. Our sense is, when we eat naturally flavored foods, without excessive salt and sugars, we feel satisfied earlier and tend to eat less."

More operators are avoiding nebulous words like "healthy" and "nutritious" in favor of more specific descriptors. Aramark Corp. uses bold identifiers to denote options that are lower in fat, calories or carbohydrates.

"We don't use the word 'healthy' because it means different things to different people," explains O'Naturals President Mac McCabe.



Subway, in addition to its popular “7 subs under 6 grams fat,” offers wraps that are “carbohydrate controlled.” Red Lobster’s LightHouse Selections consist of suggestions for customers who are “counting calories,” following a “low-carb lifestyle,” “watching fat intake” or looking for foods “lower in carbs, fats and calories.” Chili’s offers six different “Guiltless Grill” choices that support a healthy lifestyle, while Fazoli’s has a “Smart Italian Choices” category of lower-fat items.

MINDFUL DINING

For others, “mindfulness” is a better term for conveying good health and flavor. The independent fine-dining Rock Creek Restaurant in Bethesda, Md., built an entire menu on the concept of “mindful dining,” defined as “a complementary mix of nutritionally balanced foods that are as kind to your palate as they are to your body.”

Entrées are kept under 500 calories, and if that’s not filling enough, patrons can also enjoy sliced whole-grain bread with hummus and a variety of starters, desserts and drinks.

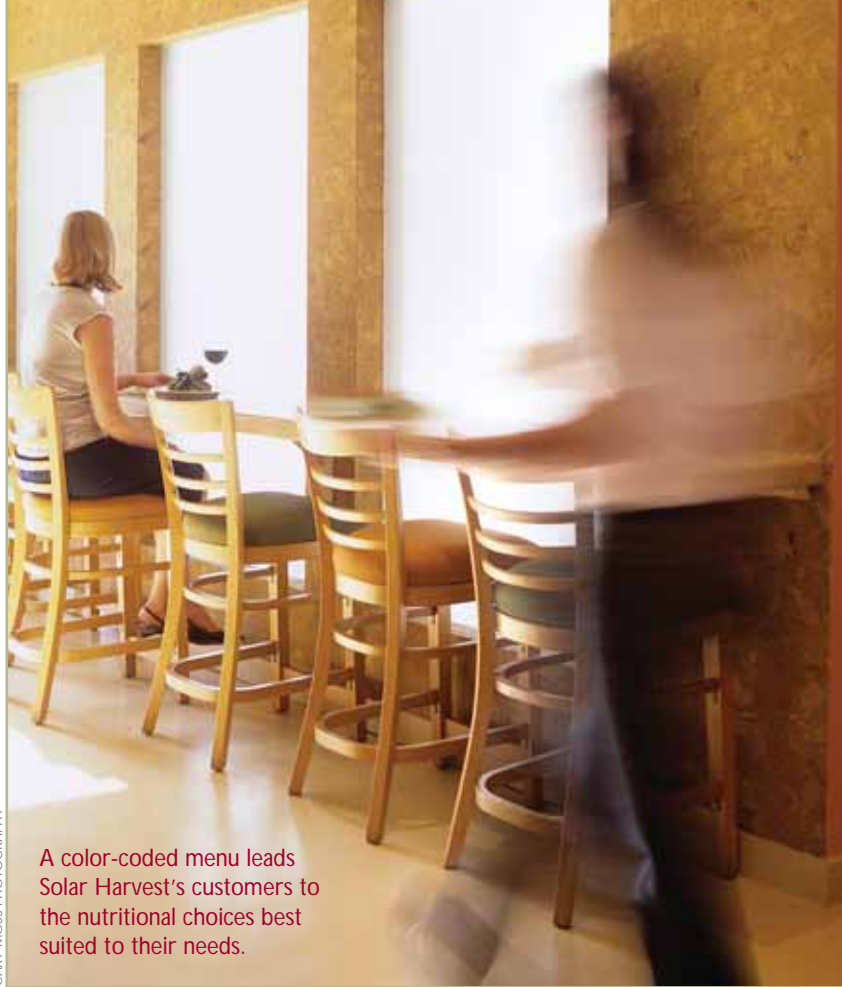
Fred Przyborowski, Rock Creek’s “culinary maestro,” designs a new menu seasonally, because “fresh is the key to flavor.” And those aren’t just words to Rock Creek. One of its customers, obviously used to seeing tomatoes available year-round, asked Przyborowski when she was going to see a tomato on the menu again. He responded, “When you see it on the vine.”

While nutritional information for every item is available on the back of the menu, Judith Hammerschmidt, one of Rock Creek’s proprietors, says some patrons just don’t want to look at it. And they don’t have to.

“At Rock Creek, we make it easy for our customers, because we are conscious of the calories without depriving them of flavor. Frankly, I wish we didn’t have to list nutritional information, but that won’t happen until all restaurants are health conscious.”

FRESH NEW WORDS

In the attempt to convey healthful and flavorful, it’s no coincidence that the word “fresh” comes up a lot. Nearly half of all



A color-coded menu leads Solar Harvest’s customers to the nutritional choices best suited to their needs.

GARY MOSS PHOTOGRAPHY

consumers Technomic surveyed said “fresh” is the most important characteristic of a healthy food or beverage consumed away from home. And Foodservice Research Institute’s MenuMine database found that “fresh” is the most common cue for healthful.

Operators like Baja Fresh and Fresh City are using the power of freshness in their names. Others, like Subway, use taglines to encourage diners to “eat fresh.” Many more use “fresh” to describe their food.

Technomic found the descriptors most strongly associated with freshness were “fresh baked,” “cooked/made-to-order” and “made-on-premises.”

Operators are building on the fresh appeal with descriptors such as “natural” and “organic.” Other back-to-basics menu descriptors that imply healthfulness include natural, whole-grain, organic, free-range, antibiotic-free, vegetarian and raw-cultured.

El Pollo Loco, operating more than 325 restaurants in California, Arizona, Nevada and Texas, offers fresh Mexican entrées, including its special marinated, grilled

TOP FIVE

consumer-rated chains with healthy or nutritional menu offerings:

SUBWAY

OLIVE GARDEN

RED LOBSTER

APPLEBEE’S

T.G.I. FRIDAY’S

TECHNOMIC, MAY 2005

Garden Fare®

For years Italians have turned fresh ingredients into flavorful, balanced meals. Our Garden Fare choices allow you to personalize your Italian meal to help meet your needs.

If You're Looking For Low Fat Options...

🍴 This olive branch will lead you to our delicious low fat entrees.

If You're Watching Carbohydrates...

- Save one of our grilled entrees with fresh vegetables in place of potatoes.
- Enjoy our pasta entrees with whole wheat linguine.

Ask your server for our Nutrition Information Guide.



Extending an olive branch to health-conscious customers has worked for Olive Garden, which gets high marks for its Garden Fare menu selections.

chicken. Pollo Tropical, an 80-plus-unit regional chain in Florida, Latin America and the Caribbean, emphasizes “fresh” with “hot off the grill” chicken and “made from scratch” side dishes. Extreme Pita, a successful Canadian chain with 152 locations (seven in the United States) also promotes its food as “fast, fresh and healthy” and grills to order in front of customers.

“Our tagline is: ‘Fast, fresh and healthy’ — fresh because everything is made to order,” explains Alex Rechichi, president, co-founder and director of Extreme Pita.

He believes the “fresh” descriptor translates to “flavorful,” another important identifier for the operation, which posts messages like “Hear the sizzle, taste the flavor,” “Taste matters” and “Feel good about what you eat” inside stores and on the company’s website.

CRACKING THE CODES

Then there are menus that avoid words altogether, opting instead for icons and symbols. While the heart-healthy symbol is one of the better-known strategies for bringing attention to healthful menu items, for many in the business, it’s a bad idea, denoting a health penalty and a bland menu item. But not everyone has given up on menu codes, and many have new and improved ones.

Fast-food giant McDonald’s, opting not to wait for a legislative mandate, will put detailed nutritional information on food and drink packaging at its 30,000 restaurants worldwide early this year. Packages will be printed with bar charts showing the calories, protein, fat, carbohydrates and sodium in each item and the percentage each represents in a

Fresh, made-to-order and made-on-premises are common cues for healthful menu items.



FLORIDA TOMATO COMMITTEE

According to Technomic data from May 2005, extending the olive branch has worked. Consumers rated Olive Garden No. 2 in the country for offering healthy or nutritional menu offerings. Subway got top honors, and Red Lobster, Applebee's and T.G.I. Friday's rated three, four and five respectively.

COLOR-CODING

Sometimes a little color helps a menu convey goodness. Recently opened in Beverly Hills, Solar Harvest is a quick-casual concept that uses a color-coded menu to lead its customers to healthful menu options. Owner Elissa Meadows, like O'Naturals' McCabe, recognizes that healthy can mean different things to different people and came up with a unique system of six different-colored dots to make it easy for customers to choose food that works for them.

"If you want to eat vegetarian, you don't have to ask what's in the food — you can eat everything with the green dot," Meadows explains.

"The blue dot has minimal carbohydrates, while the orange dot designates high-carbohydrate meals that contain natural, unrefined and minimally processed carbohydrates. But knowing that everybody doesn't want to eat healthy all the time, we also offer comfort foods, noted by a red dot."

Operators who have cracked the health code have found ways to serve good-for-you food that's full of flavor as well as nourishment.

"These days, consumers are starting to define health not by just what is calorically on the menu, but by how healthfully the items have been raised and where they have been transported from," observes Amanda Archibald, principal analyst with foodservice trend tracker Mintel Menu Insights. "In short, health is morphing from caloric choice to conscious choice." ☺

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daily 2,000-calorie diet. Icons, such as building blocks for protein, provide universally understood visual cues next to each nutritional value.

Olive Garden uses an olive branch to denote its "Garden Fare" lower-fat and lower-carbohydrate selections, says Steven Coe, the chain's director of media relations.

"We've offered Garden Fare options on the menu since 1986," he notes. "While originally identified with a 'GF' within a circle, with a recent menu revision we changed to an olive branch. We thought it was not only more visually appealing, but also more Italian. In addition, we added a box on the menu that explains the Garden Fare program and suggestions for those looking for lower-carbohydrate options."

take-away tips

▶ CODE IT:

Color-coding and attractive icons can send a healthy message without words

▶ BE SPECIFIC:

Healthy means different things to different people