



Nutrition Analysis: All the Facts

Learn how nutrition analysis will change your business for the better—and how to get started.

Most restaurant operators get into this industry because they love good food and sharing it with others. Now, with the recent passage of the national health care reform bill, an industry whose sole focus was previously on food must now turn their attention to nutrition. Alyson Mar, RD, Director of Nutrition at FoodCALC, has broken down the basics of nutrition analysis to help you decide if it is right for your business:

What Is Nutrition Analysis?

Alyson: Nutrition Analysis refers to the process of determining the nutritional content of food. The FDA requires food manufacturers to display nutrition information on retail food products with Nutrition Fact Panel Labels, and soon the National Menu Labeling Law will require restaurants to display nutrition information for their menu items.

In the world of nutrition analysis there are two ways to calculate the nutritional content of a food sample; chemically, and by calculation. Chemical analysis must be performed in a lab where food is incinerated and tested for its exact nutrient content. Analysis via calculation involves taking data from ingredients that have been previously chemically tested and scaling those ingredients to match the amounts used in the final food product or recipe.

Why Do Nutrition Analysis?

Alyson: There are a number of reasons to do nutrition analysis for your restaurant's menu items: compliance with national menu labeling laws; increasing consumer awareness; and marketability in providing your customers with valuable information. Let me break each one down a little:

Compliance. With the recent passage of the health care reform bill, which will affect restaurant chains with 20 or more locations (which is roughly 250,000 total locations), there is no better time to comply than now.

Awareness. As more multi-unit and independent restaurants start complying with menu-labeling laws and general concerns about healthy dining increase, consumer demand for nutrition information has also increased. I find that a lot more restaurants are speaking openly about nutrition information. They can see it coming and instead of shying away from it, they are curious about its benefits and impact on their operation. More tradeshows are having whole sessions surrounding nutrition information, healthy eating, and marketing to the health-conscious diner. These sessions did not really exist one or two years ago, and now you will most likely find at least one, if not two, speakers on the topic at any given show.

We've all read the study completed by the National Restaurant Association's 2009 Industry Forecast, which says researchers found that three in four adults say they are trying to eat healthier at restaurants than they did two years ago.

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Marketability. Providing nutrition information opens a level of marketability that will allow you to reach out to new customers. Many of our customers have chosen to select several healthy menu items from their menus to provide nutrition information. This provides their customers with options for healthy dining and conveys a sense of nutritional responsibility. This is a new era for our industry, a time to broaden our diner audience. I read in the New American Diner survey from Restaurants & Institutions that 82% of diners said calorie disclosure is influencing what they order, and 60% said it determines where they eat. Using social media platforms such as Yelp and Facebook can really help restaurants make the most of their analysis results.

Increase in Sales. A study performed by the University of Missouri found that customers were willing to pay up to \$2 more per menu item for healthier menu items when nutrition facts were present. As a Registered Dietitian it's great to see companies providing this information to diners, but to know that people see true value by paying more is even better!

What Next?

What is your advice for a restaurant operator just getting started with nutrition analysis?

Alyson: To someone who is new to the analysis process, the details needed for generating nutrition information may be a bit of a shock. As someone who has been doing this for some many years, I have found the following things useful when restaurant operators begin their analysis.

The first step is to choose an analysis solution. Decide whether you want to go with a laboratory analysis or a database system. To prepare for a lab analysis you'll have to figure out how to pack and send in your samples as requested by the lab of choice. Because laboratory analysis is costly, most companies choose to go with database analysis.

Get recipe specs. If you don't already use standardized recipes this is the perfect opportunity to write them. Having and following standardized recipes will not only improve the accuracy of your nutrition results, but will also help with forecasting, reduce waste, and improve consistency.

At a minimum, you will need to provide a thorough ingredient list (i.e. specific cuts of beef, not just "beef"), ingredient quantities (see below), and portion sizes.

Get up close and personal with your scale. Many restaurants write their recipe specs by volume measurements (i.e. 1 cup, #20 scoop, fluid ounces, etc). Nutrition analysis by calculation is most accurate when ingredients are entered by weight. Having corresponding weights for your volume measurements will help speed up the process, as well as increase accuracy.

Gather your facts. If you have specialty ingredients that are not likely found in a database (i.e. Alyson's bakery ciabatta rolls), start to gather the nutrition labels from your packaging or request them from your vendors. Having these together and on hand will save you from scrambling at the last minute.

No exclusions. In the world of nutrition, every little bit counts. Make sure that the ingredients that you list in the recipe reflect everything that the diner is served. Some hidden ingredients that are often overlooked or forgotten include: butter or spread on buns/rolls, oil absorbed during frying, marinade absorbed during marinating, garnishes (if edible), side dishes/items (i.e. dinner rolls served with salads).

Once your analysis is complete, you will need to establish where and how to display the information to your customers. When complying with menu labeling regulations, there are many rules about what font you need to use, where the information will be visible, etc. Give yourself time to work with your designer and printer.



There is a fear of lost business among restaurant operators who feature menu items that are high in calories and fat. As a Registered Dietitian, what is your perception of what diners demand from restaurants, and how might the industry cater to diners’ nutritional preferences?

Alyson: It’s important to know that most of the studies conducted in the areas where menu labeling laws have already passed show no negative impact or change in sales. In fact, in some cases, providing this information has actually increased sales.

However, there are things you can do as a restaurant operator to mitigate these concerns.

Have options. Diners like to feel informed and empowered. You might consider a section of your menu for healthy-minded or dieting diners, with suggestions such as splitting an entrée, ordering sauce on the side, substituting greens for half of a starch, or ordering doubles vegetables. These are options that many diners want, but are sometimes afraid to ask for, or they just have no idea it is an option to them at all.

Look for ways to make lemonade out of lemons. Use this information for marketing campaigns, social media sites, attracting new customers who are counting calories, get creative with new and modified recipes. Once you have the nutrition results, the marketing and exposure possibilities are endless.

What trends have you noticed among diners with regards to their nutritional preferences at restaurants?

Alyson: Menu labeling is without a doubt, the hottest trend right now in an effort to please diners. My advice to restaurant operators is to watch the trendsetters and get ideas for your business. Use what you have, including nutrition information, as a competitive advantage. These are some hot trends that I’ve been seeing and hearing from the industry :

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| Low calorie menus | Gluten free |
| Declaring allergens | Salt free |
| Organic, local, sustainable | Alternative side options and swaps |



“ Though nutrition analysis for restaurant menu items has begun as a trend, it is poised to quickly become the standard for menus all around the country. ”

Finding an affordable, accurate, and user-friendly analysis solution is advantageous, if not compulsory, in the current industry climate. Though nutrition analysis for restaurant menu items has begun as a trend, it is poised to quickly become the standard for menus all around the country.

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