### Decisions, Decisions...

**Sandwich or salad? Pasta or pizza?** We’ve all been there. Here are our answers to questions that people often ask themselves when they eat out. In most cases, our numbers (they’re from the chains’ Web sites) hold up for similar restaurants.

#### Latte: Tea or Coffee?

**Are you better off with a latte made with tea or one made with espresso?**

**Decision:** A coffee (espresso) latte may be better, because some tea lattes are loaded with sugar. A Starbucks grande (16 oz.) Green Tea Latte made with nonfat milk, for example, has 290 calories. That’s more than the Earl Grey (150), Chai (210), or Chocolate Chai (240) Tea Latte. A venti (20 oz.) Green Tea Latte hits 370 calories.

In contrast, a grande Caffè Latte made with nonfat milk has just 130 calories (from the milk). Vanilla or other sweetened lattes have around 200 calories, but the Skinny lattes (made with the questionably sweetener sucralose) have just 120.

**Tip:** Cut calories even more with a grande nonfat Cappuccino (80), Caffè Misto (70), or coffee and a packet of sugar (20).

#### Oatmeal or Yogurt Parfait?

**Which makes a better breakfast on the run?**

**Decision:** Either. Both beat every muffin, bagel, scone, banana bread, croissant, or other bakery item on the menu. Starbucks’ oatmeal has 150 calories’ worth of unsweetened whole-grain oats (and 4 grams of fiber). You can add fresh blueberries (20 calories), dried fruit (100), or a nut medley (100). At Panera, try the pecans (100). At both chains, skip the brown sugar, cinnamon crunch, and agave syrup.

You can’t avoid the added sugar (about 5 teaspoons) in the parfaits, though. And Panera’s Strawberry Granola Parfait and Starbucks’ Greek Yogurt with Honey Parfait have 4½ or 6 grams of saturated fat. But Starbucks’ 300-calorie Strawberry Blueberry and Peach Raspberry Yogurt Parfaits keep the saturated fat to ½ gram. And the parfaits have more calcium and more protein (8 or 9 grams) than the oatmeal (5 grams; 7 with nuts).

**Tip:** Want more protein? A 170-calorie Breakfast Egg White Bowl with Roasted Turkey from Panera’s Hidden Menu has 28 grams. At other chains, look for egg white sandwiches.

#### Fries or Sweet Fries?

**Sweet potato fries sound like a healthy alternative to regular fries. True?**

**Decision:** Nope. Skip them both. Sweet potatoes have more vitamin A and fiber, but watch out. At Johnny Rockets, for example, a burrito’s flour tortilla has around 300 calories’ worth of mostly white flour, plus around 700 milligrams of sodium.

In contrast, three crispy taco-size corn tortillas at either chain have roughly 180 calories and 50 mg of sodium. Soft corn tortillas (Qdoba doesn’t offer them) are about the same. Three soft taco-size flour tortillas? You might as well get the burrito tortilla.

But it’s not just the wrapper. Most people fill a burrito with rice (even more carbs!), beans, chicken, salsa, and cheese. Grand total: some 1,000 calories (and 2,000+ mg of sodium). Three crispy tacos with chicken, cheese, salsa, and lettuce total about 500 calories (and 1,000 mg of sodium).

**Tip:** Lose the flour tortilla. Get a Burrito Bowl at Chipotle or a Naked Burrito at Qdoba. With brown rice, chicken, black beans, salsa, and cheese, it’s about 600 calories. Or get a salad (same ingredients, but with lettuce instead of rice). At Chipotle, use the tomato or green salsa instead of the 260-calorie vinaigrette. Qdoba’s dressings are low-cal. Just skip its fried tortilla bowl.

#### Which is better?

**Burrito or Tacos?**

**Are tacos worse because their tortillas are usually fried?**

**Decision:** Flour tortillas are worse than soft or crispy (fried) corn tortillas. At Chipotle or Qdoba, for example, a burrito’s flour tortilla has around 300 calories’ worth of mostly white flour, plus around 700 milligrams of sodium.

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Chinese: Beef or Chicken?

At a Chinese restaurant, are you better off ordering chicken or beef?

**Decision:** It depends. If you order General Tso’s, orange, sesame, honey, kung pao, or some other breaded, fried, sauce-laden chicken dish, you’ll push away from the table with 1,000 to 1,200 calories... and that’s without any rice, according to numbers from Pei Wei, Pick Up Stix, and similar chains. That’s more than beef with broccoli and other unbreaded beef dishes, which have about 700 to 900 calories without rice.

Chicken with black bean sauce, moo goo gai pan, or another unbreaded, nonfried chicken dish, on the other hand, delivers only 600 to 700 calories... and (usually) more veggies. Szechuan and garlic shrimp are in the same ballpark.

Just don’t expect less sodium. Most entreés, even the lighter ones, pack 2,000 to 3,000 milligrams (1 to 2 days’ worth). Add another 400 mg for every packet (or teaspoon) of soy sauce you use.

And don’t assume that vegetarian dishes are a calorie bargain. You’re fine with zucchini string beans or Buddha’s delight (500 calories), but eggplant in garlic sauce, stir-fried spinach or other greens, or curry vegetables (blame the curry’s coconut) hover around 1,000 calories without rice. Even fried tofu with vegetables hits 800 to 1,000 calories. Save (at least) half for tomorrow’s lunch.

**Tip:** Whatever you order, try skipping some of the rice. Brown beats white, but both have about 300 calories in a typical ½-cup serving. At some food courts, you could get 2 cups. That’s 400 calories you probably don’t need.

Sandwich or Salad?

For many people, a sandwich is “the usual” lunch. Is a salad better?

**Decision:** A salad beats a sandwich, though you have to choose your salad wisely.

Take Panera. Most of its sandwiches (not the half sandwich in a You Pick 2) and paninis start out with 300 to 500 calories from the ciabatta, French baguette, focaccia, tomato basil, honey wheat, or three cheese bread. Who needs all that (mostly) white flour? The Sierra Turkey on Asiago Cheese Focaccia gets 690 of its 820 calories from the focaccia ($10) and the chipotle mayonnaise (180).

Only a few breads, like the sourdough, keep the calories down to 200. And expect roughly 700 to 900 milligrams of sodium—at least half a day’s worth—from most of the breads alone. With fillings, most sandwiches hit 600 to 900 calories and 1,000 to 2,500 mg of sodium.

In contrast, a full salad starts with greens (maybe even spinach) and raw veggies. With dressing, chicken, cheese, and other usual add-ons, the totals typically hit 400 to 600 calories. And the veggies’ potassium may counter some of the damage done by the sodium (700 to 1,500 mg).

Note: at Panera, you can skip ingredients like crispy won-ton strips or croutons, which have about 100 calories each. And you can save another 100 by using just half the dressing. Whatever you order, don’t forget to add 180 calories if you get a baguette on the side.

**Tip:** Wraps aren’t much different from sandwiches. You’re just trading the bread for a 300-calorie white-flour tortilla.

Pizza or Pasta?

Both pizza crust and pasta supply a load of (usually) white flour. And most pizzas come with cheese. Which does the least damage?

**Decision:** This is a tough one. Both are loaded with calories, carbs, sodium, and more. But at least with pasta, you can dodge the saturated fat... if you’re careful.

At California Pizza Kitchen, where each person typically orders an entire pizza, the calories hover around 1,000 for both pizza and pasta. (At Uno Chicago Grill, single deep-dish pizzas range from 1,600 to 3,300 calories.)

That’s true even for pizzas like the Original Hand-Tossed California Veggie (1,070 calories) or the Pear + Gorgonzola (1,420). Roughly half the calories come from the crust. CPK’s (mostly white flour) honey-wheat with whole grain crust adds 140 extra calories. And most CPK pizzas deliver 15 to 25 grams of sat fat.

With pasta, you can cut the saturated fat back (to just 4 or 5 grams)... if it has no cream, cheese, or meat. At CPK, that leaves only Kung Pao Spaghetti. At most other chains, you can go with a red or white clam, marinara, or pomodoro (that is, tomato) sauce.

But watch out. A pasta with cheese or meat is likely to reach at least 10 grams (half a day’s worth) of saturated fat. Worse yet, a pasta with cream sauce—like CPK’s Pesto Cream Penne or Garlic Cream Fettuccine—can hit 40-some grams of sat fat. Bring your defibrillator.

Sodium is another minefield. Expect 1,200 to 2,400 milligrams in a typical pasta and (stroke alert!) 2,000 to 3,000 mg (1,000 from the crust alone) in most pizzas.

**Tip:** A salad beats both pizza and pasta because you fill up on veggies, not white flour. (Note: at CPK, even the salads have around 1,000 calories, so order a half salad.) If you want to leave with no more fat cells than you brought, stick to a salad or split your pasta (try the part-whole-grain multigrain penne) or pizza. Or take home half for tomorrow.
**SPECIAL FEATURE**

**Pita: Gyro or Falafel**

At a Greek or Middle Eastern sandwich shop, should you get the gyro (a blend of lamb and beef) or the falafel (fried chickpea patties)?

**Decision:** Go with the falafel. The gyro has more saturated fat, more calories, and (usually) more sodium than the falafel—or chicken or vegetable sandwich fillings—on most menus.

Take Daphne’s, a “California-fresh” West Coast chain with 56 restaurants that lists calories on its menus and Nutrition Facts on its Web site. The Classic Pita sandwich has 660 calories and 16 grams (more than three-quarters of a day’s supply) of saturated fat if you fill it with Fresh-Carved Gyros, but 510 calories and 4 grams of sat fat if you fill it with Falafel. The Gyros’ 1,025 mg of sodium also tops the Falafel’s 860 mg.

Ditto for the Classic Greek salad. You’re talking 620 calories (and 20 grams of sat fat) for the Gyro version versus 540 calories (and 8 grams of sat fat) for the Falafel. And those numbers don’t include the dressing (60 calories for the Greek Lite or 110 for the Classic Greek) or the pita (180 calories) and tzatziki sauce (50 calories) that come on the side.

**Tip:** A salad or a pita sandwich with grilled chicken or vegetables trumps both the falafel and the gyro.

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**Noodles or Rice?**

At some Asian restaurants, you can choose rice or noodles (like lo mein) on the side. Which is best?

**Decision:** If you’re talking about a side dish at a quick-order restaurant like Pei Wei or Manchu Wok, go with rice to save on sodium. At Pei Wei, for example, an order of egg noodles has 1,010 milligrams of sodium. At Manchu Wok, the lo mein noodles have 850 mg and the Shanghai noodles will set you back 1,620 mg.

In contrast, steamed rice has essentially no sodium. And Pei Wei and some other chains offer brown rice, which has more fiber and vitamins than white. Just steer clear of the fried rice (800 to 1,200 mg of sodium). And watch out for main-dish noodles (see “Pad Thai or Pad Pak?”).

**Tip:** Ask for a side dish of vegetables instead of rice or noodles. The sodium (about 500 mg) isn’t low, but the vegetables have fewer calories (about 100) than the rice or noodles (300 to 400). And the vegetables’ potassium may counter the load of sodium in the rest of your Asian food.

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**Pad Thai or Pad Pak?**

Pad Thai is wildly popular. Most people have never heard of Pad Pak. Which is best?

**Decision:** Pad Pak—stir-fried vegetables with chicken, shrimp, or tofu and a small side of rice—wins, hands down. That’s because Pad Thai—rice noodles, shrimp, bean sprouts, egg, tofu, and crushed peanuts—is such bad news.

At Pick Up Stix, for example, the Chicken Pad Thai has 1,480 calories and 4,300 milligrams of sodium. At Pei Wei, the calories (even for the Vegetable & Tofu Pad Thai) hover around 1,500, and the sodium rounds to a hard-to-believe 5,000 mg—for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Somehow, Pad Thai still has a decent reputation. People who would never order an entrée of fried rice don’t flinch at a plate consisting largely of oil-soaked rice noodles. Yet Pei Wei’s and Pick Up Stix’s Pad Thais are worse than an entrée of their fried rice with chicken, shrimp, or beef.

We estimate that the Pad Pak at most Thai restaurants has 400 to 500 calories (plus another 300 for every 1½ cups of rice you eat). Sodium is hard to estimate.

**Tip:** Beware of curry dishes at Thai restaurants. Their coconut can easily supply a day’s saturated fat.

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**Ice Cream or Frozen Yogurt?**

Does Pinkberry or TCBY beat a scoop of Ben & Jerry’s or Häagen-Dazs?

**Decision:** Frozen yogurt wins. Even a single (half-cup) scoop of premium ice cream has about 10 grams of saturated fat. Frozen yogurt has anywhere from 0 to 2 grams per half cup.

But if you’re not careful, your frozen yogurt could have as many calories as that single scoop of ice cream (250 to 300). That’s the case with a (1¼-cup) regular soft-serve frozen yogurt at TCBY or medium at Pinkberry, for example.

And who knows how much people squeeze into those (typically 16 oz.) cups at self-serve chains? (The Nutrition Facts on their posters or brochures are for a measly half cup—just 4 oz.)

Then come the toppings. At Pinkberry, where employees do the scooping, calories range from 10 (fresh fruit) to 50 (nuts or chocolate chips) to 100 (peanut butter crunch) ...if they stick to the tiny one-tablespoon scoop. At a self-serve chain, all bets are off. Topping your two-cup (16 oz.) serving of fat-free chocolate with one scoop each of nuts, chips, and Nutella could rack up 650 calories. Oops.

**Tip:** Order a “kids” or “mini” size (about ½ cup) to keep the calories down around 100, and stick to fresh fruit toppings.

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The information for this article was compiled by Paige Einstein and Lindsay Moyer.