OATMEAL IS HOT.

It’s at Dunkin’ Donuts and McDonald’s. It’s at Starbucks, Au Bon Pain, and Panera. Even supermarket brands like Dole, Special K, and Quaker now sell hot cereal in single-serve cups that you can grab on your way out the door. Just add boiling water and stir (or cold water and microwave for a minute or so).

But Dr. McDougall’s Oatmeal Cups are the cream of the crop. That’s because you can “customize your sweetness!” as the package suggests. Each cup comes with a packet of sugar and salt. Use as much (or as little) as you wish.

In contrast, Dole Fruit & Oatmeal, Special K Nourish, and Quaker Real Medleys add sugars—sometimes disguised as dried cane syrup or white grape juice concentrate—to their oatmeal and/or fruit. (At least you can leave behind most of Dole’s sugar by draining the fruit.)

Dr. McDougall jazzes up his organic oatmeal with flavors like Apple Flax, Cranberry Almond, Hemp Peach, Organic Maple, and Fruit Flax & Nuts. How’s that for a change?

Dr. M says that without the sugar and salt packet, each (delicious) cup holds 180 to 260 calories and 6 to 9 grams of protein, with 1 gram or less of saturated fat and no sodium. (Depending on the flavor, the packet adds 3 1/2 to 5 teaspoons of sugar and 200 to 330 mg of sodium.) Most impressive: the 6 to 8 grams of unprocessed, intact fiber (mostly from oats) that should help keep you full and lower your cholesterol.

What a deal.

We’ve come a long way from Quaker Peaches & Cream Instant Oatmeal that contains no peaches or cream.

IHEAVY

“Our crepes are light, delicate and rolled with savory or sweet ingredients for a meal that’s a delicious choice any time of day—or night,” says the IHOP Web site.

Why order a stack of pancakes or a belgian waffle when you can opt for light and delicate?

IHOP’s Garden Stuffed Crepes sound especially virtuous. “Two crepes stuffed with Swiss cheese, eggs scrambled with fresh spinach, mushrooms & onions topped with hollandaise & tomatoes,” says the menu. Spinach, mushrooms, onions, tomatoes. How can you go wrong?

Easily…and to the tune of 1,230 calories and 29 grams (1 1/2 days’ worth) of saturated fat. That’s more “light and delicate” calories and sat fat than you’d find in any of IHOP’s pancakes, french toasts, stuffed french toasts, or belgian waffles (at least until you add syrup).

Blame it on the hollandaise sauce, though the crepes, cheese, and eggs do their share. The 1,730 milligrams of sodium (a day’s supply) just add salt to the wound.

Eating an order of Garden Crepes is like downing two eggs, three pork sausage links, and three slices of bacon, plus hash browns and toast with butter and jam.

Your best bet: IHOP’s Simple & Fit dishes, which have less than 600 calories. Try the Vegetable Omelette (310 calories) or the 2-Egg Breakfast made with egg substitute, turkey bacon, whole wheat toast, and seasonal mixed fruit (340 calories).

So “fit” means light, and “light” means heavy? Guess you just have to know ILANGUAGE.

ihop.com - (866) 444-5144

photos: Lindsay Moyer/CSPI (top left), Paige Einstein/CSPI (top right), Kate Sherwood/CSPI (bottom)

dish of the month

Quick Citrusy Salad

Toss 8 cups of loosely packed mixed greens with a dressing made by combining 2 Tbs. minced red onion, 1 Tbs. red wine vinegar, 2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil, and 1/4 tsp. kosher salt. Top with 3 sliced clementines, 1/4 cup chopped avocado, and 2 Tbs. sunflower seeds. Serves 4.

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quick tip

On the fence about signing up for a supermarket loyalty card? Ask if the chain uses purchase data to contact shoppers who bought foods that were subsequently recalled. If it does, sign up. It could save your life.