About CSPI, publisher of Nutrition Action Healthletter

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), founded in 1971, is an independent nonprofit consumer health group. CSPI advocates honest food labeling and advertising and safer and more nutritious foods. CSPI’s work is supported by Nutrition Action Healthletter subscribers and foundation grants. CSPI accepts no government or industry funding. Nutrition Action Healthletter, first published in 1974, accepts no advertising.

RIGHT STUFF

PEPPER PICK

Looking for a snack to bring to the office or on a long car ride? You’ve got baby carrots, grape tomatoes, sugar snap peas, or any fruit in season. If you’re hankering for something a little different, pick up a bag of mini sweet peppers. A serving (about three peppers) delivers just 30 calories, but packs a third of a day’s vitamin A and nearly three days’ worth of vitamin C. And mini peppers have so few seeds, you probably won’t even notice them.

The downside? They’re probably not organic. At least the two brands we found—Wilson Produce (mostly in the Midwest and West) and Pero Family Farms (mostly east of the Mississippi)—weren’t. (Pero does sell organic mini peppers, but they’re not widely distributed.) If you can find bags of organic mini peppers from another company or loose at a store or (better yet) farmers market, by all means buy them.

But if that’s not going to happen, plunking down $5 for a two-pound bag of more than 30 mini peppers is a smart move. Of course, you don’t have to eat them unadorned. Try a quick dip in some hummus or tzatziki. Or build a salad by tossing together sliced mini peppers, tomatoes, cucumber, and diced red onion. Or chop and add to a stir-fry or a grain or bean dish like tabouli, pilaf, bean salsa, or lentil salad. Then there’s roasting or grilling.

But the real beauty of mini sweet peppers is that you can pop one in your mouth whole. If you can find a tastier, more filling 10-calorie snack, let us know.

Pero Family Farms: (561) 498-4533
Wilson Produce: (520) 375-5755

KILLER CARBONARA?

“Blending 20 years of tradition with innovative Italian cooking,” says Romano’s Macaroni Grill’s Web site. “Something New. Something Classic.” That seems to explain the chain’s Carbonara. The Grill’s chefs took a classic carbonara—spaghetti, Italian bacon, Parmesan—and (drumroll) slapped a poached egg on top. What could be more innovative?

Your “something new” brings 1,260 calories to store in your new fat cells, and sends 29 grams of saturated fat (1½ days’ worth) and 3,640 milligrams of sodium (a two-day supply) straight to your arteries. It’s like eating two Big Macs plus a scoop of Häagen-Dazs Chocolate ice cream. And that doesn’t include the Peasant Bread (480 calories and 2,150 mg of sodium) and dipping olive oil (120 calories per tablespoon) that show up on your table before the entrée arrives.

Macaroni Grill does offer a “Lite” menu of six entrées with less than 600 calories. Well, let’s hope it does. The carbs are largely gone, but if the samples we examined at a Washington, DC-area Macaroni Grill are typical, odds are that the Grilled Shrimp Spiedini and Warm Spinach & Shrimp have well over the 380 or 340 calories listed on the company’s Web site. Your best bet: the Pan-Seared Branzino (European sea bass), which looks like it could actually clock in at the promised 570 calories.

“Never intimidating and always comforting, Macaroni Grill delivers an experience that is perfect to celebrate your big day or every day,” says the Web site. Comfortable? Only if you wear something that leaves room for your new carbonara.

Romano’s Macaroni Grill: (972) 674-4300

Berry Yogurt Bliss

Whisk together 1 tsp. of vanilla, 1 Tbs. of sugar, 2 Tbs. of orange juice, and 6 oz. (¼ cup) of unflavored nonfat Greek yogurt. Divide 2 pints of mixed berries among four dessert bowls and top each with a quarter of the yogurt mix.

Photos: Pero Family Farms (left), Jorge Bach/CSPI (right).