

# The Calorie Conundrum

STORY BY REN PARK

A debate about calories on a menu.

It was my mom's birthday. The big "Five-Eight."

I put on my brand new dark red pleather dress and my favorite black denim jacket and accompanied her to the finest dining location in the nation—Chili's. We used to go all the time, so I figured it'd be familiar. Simple. Fun.

We'd go in and order a meal that would probably be good enough without sending us into economic turmoil. I'd grab the salad I always used to have as a kid, and my mom would eat some gluten-free chicken tacos.

When we got there, my plan went down the toilet. To my dismay, the menu looked more like a receipt. After every delectable description of every dish was a triple-digit number taunting me.

My mom asked the waitress if they had corn flour tortillas and if we could get a menu without the discouraging details.

"I'll go check for you," she said. The air was tense as she speed-walked away. The answer to this question could make or break my entire restaurant experience, and we all knew it. When she returned to take our drink orders, she informed us, "There's a new law that says we have to put calories on our menus or something."

Said law, according to the Public Health Law Center, mandates that any large chain restaurant or similar venue must have nutritional information available to customers prior to the purchase of food items.

This law is, in the eloquent words of my dietician, total crap.

What officials have clearly failed to consider is the over five million individuals in the US alone who struggle with eating disorders.

Forcing calorie-counting onto every patron who just wants to enjoy a meal is unnecessary and more harmful than people realize. Sending the message that certain foods (specifically those with a higher caloric content) are inherently bad isn't helping anyone. Once the idea lodges itself into someone's brain that they shouldn't eat certain foods, it can be a slippery slope leading directly into restrictive eating disorders.

But what about the health of Americans? What about the obesity epidemic? Firstly, an eating disorder is more harmful than any food could ever be. Secondly, I ask you this: what's helpful to the health of Americans about some people possibly

eating less calories when they occasionally go out to eat? Why not look at other causes of obesity?

There's an abundance of unwalkable cities in the US compared to other countries with lower obesity rates due to a problem called single-use zoning. Single-use zoning is an ineffective method of urban planning wherein similar types of land uses are zoned together. Stores are concentrated in one area, housing in another, industrial uses in another, etc. Since everything is far away, people have to drive to get around. People will even drive from their house to a park just to go for a walk, because they won't get to walk around otherwise.

Every time I pass the local park and see dozens of cars in the parking lot with people scattered along the walking trail, I have to wonder why they couldn't give themselves the "we have sidewalks at home" talk.

There are lower requirements for food quality in the US compared to other countries with lower obesity rates. In the US, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has the power to decide which foods and ingredients are deemed Generally Recognized As Safe (GRAS). Since companies only use these "safe" ingredients, their products are legally considered fit for human consumption.

The EU, however, finds several of our American ingredients to be too harmful for people in their countries to ingest. Food dyes like yellow five and six, red dye 40, blue dye one, etc. have been found to be so unhealthy that they're banned in the UK, Norway, France, Austria, and Finland.

What's the difference? Why has the American government decided that it's okay for its citizens to eat chemicals that are detrimental to our health? Why do we have lower standards than other developed countries? Why do brands value their foods being various neon colors over the safety of their customers? Aside from a series of systematic changes in infrastructure and diet culture, it seems like the most sensible course of action against the mental and physical health crisis is to make nutritional information an option that is available to anyone who wants it, and not forced onto anyone who doesn't. Why not make a simple, easy decision that would improve the quality of life for millions of people?

For people who have restrictive eating disorders, something as simple as going out to a restaurant is a nightmare. After spending years counting and documenting exactly what I ate and how many calories each item contained, I thought I'd finally escaped the hellscape that is calorie counting. I thought I'd finally be able to eat whatever I wanted without the fear and anxiety that had always been attached to it. Eating in front of other people is a feat in itself for me, and the added knowledge of exactly how many calories I'm consuming makes it even harder. And for what?

Aside from all of the emotional anguish the listing of calories on menus causes, the numbers usually aren't accurate. In fact, the FDA allows for a 20% margin of error.

Twenty (20) percent.

If a serving of chips is listed as containing 200 calories, it could actually contain 160 or 240 calories. There's no way to know for sure. I can tell you off the top of my head that there are 105 calories in a banana, but there could really be 126 or 84.

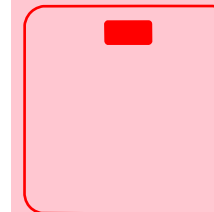
On my Chili's excursion, I noticed that the cheesecake I ate for dessert had 700 calories, but it also could've had 840 or 560. During the height of my eating disorder, I got really good at doing this math in my head before consuming anything.

So, not only is the listing of calories harmful and unnecessary, it's practically misinformation. I mean, does anyone even know what calories are? What they do? How they manifest in your body? Could any average person accurately explain that? Or has society just trained everyone to think "big number bad!"

The next time you go to a restaurant and consider ordering something that you don't want because it's "healthier," remember that there's space for all foods in a balanced diet. And the "nutrition facts" on the label might not be factual at all.

## Myth Busters

Debunking common misconceptions

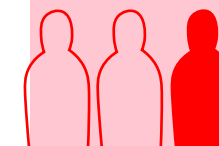
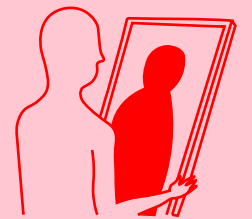


**Myth**-If someone isn't emaciated, they aren't sick.

**Fact**-Eating disorders aren't (always) visible.

**Myth**-But I don't look fat, how could I possibly have an eating disorder?

**Fact**-Body dysmorphia does not only affect those who are thin. All of these thoughts can be disordered.



**Myth**-Only girls have eating disorders.

**Fact**-One in three people who have an eating disorder is male.

**Myth**-Eating disorders only affect eating patterns.

**Fact**-Generally yes, but they go far beyond. They can feed into perfectionism and obsession that may lead to a fixation on excellent performance.

