All You Can Eat (The Remix)

With guidance from nutritionist Goulda Downer, an eager family enjoys the buffet's bounty—and learns how to eat more healthfully.

November 29, 2007 By Kathleen Reeves

After Pastor's Sunday sermon, the local buffet restaurant is a comforting and familiar spot in which to take a break from the kitchen or splurge at a reasonable price. It offers variety and plenty to taste. But it also tempts us with excess. Too often, "all you can eat" turns out to be far too much—and not all that healthful.

The Temptation: The Old Country Buffet in Laurel, Maryland, offered the Palmers trays of healthful items—pasta with vegetables, sliced roast beef, steamed green beans, carrots and broccoli. But high-fat, high-calorie dangers lurked: whipped potatoes, macaroni and cheese, and a panorama of fried foods and desserts: cupcakes, butterscotch cookies—even a soft-serve ice cream machine.

Nutritionist to the Rescue: Goulda Downer, PhD, award-winning nutritionist and CEO of Metroplex Health and Nutrition Services, Inc., based in Washington, DC, observed how the Palmers filled their plates, then suggested ways to make over their plates more healthfully.

The Surprise: The Palmers found that with the right strategy, they could conquer the perils of the all-you-can-eat buffet and still enjoy a satisfying meal.
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Hermond Palmer
Marketing executive, 47, 6'3", 220 lbs

THE PLATE HE FIXED: An impressive spread—steak, fried chicken, sesame chicken, potato salad, a roll and a taco. "I love mac and cheese," he said, "but since it's not homemade here, I passed it by." Peering at him from behind the mashed-potato station, Downer said, "Let's see how much dressing he puts on his salad."

NUTRITIONIST'S TAKE: He has too much...of everything, Downer says. Hermond had two kinds of fried meats and a whopping steak on his plate.

NUTRITIONIST'S MAKEOVER: Hermond was wary of Downer's enthusiasm for vegetables. But

when she helped him to some baked beans, he enjoyed them. With her prodding, he also chose sesame chicken over the fried chicken and downsized his steak, which was way over the recommended portion size of three ounces. “One serving is the size of a deck of cards,” Downer reminded him. When he raised an eyebrow, she added that for a man his size more than one serving is fine, as long as he adjusts his other meals that day (his daily total shouldn’t exceed 6½ ounces of meat, or two decks of cards).

HERMOND’S TAKE: “I’ve always been a carnivore, but these beans are good!”

Mechelle Palmer
Grad school admissions administrator, 48, 5’4”, 118 lbs.

THE PLATE SHE FIXED: Sesame chicken, fried whitefish, green beans and green salad with hard-boiled egg.

NUTRITIONIST’S TAKE: There weren’t enough vegetables, leaving Mechelle at risk of eating too little fiber and feeling hungry—and overeating—later. “Half of your plate should be vegetables,” Downer said. Secondly, there were too many fried foods. Even though Mechelle is at a good weight, these can still increase her risk of heart disease.

NUTRITIONIST’S MAKEOVER: Downer asked Mechelle to choose one fried food. Mechelle opted for the whitefish and discarded the sesame chicken. On her first go-round, Mechelle had spooned up some salad and green beans, but the salad bar had been her final stop. “By the time I got there,” Mechelle said, “I barely had any room on my plate!” Downer suggested touring the buffet beforehand, “then come back and make choices.” Mechelle put more green salad where the sesame chicken had been.

MECHELLE’S TAKE: She was surprised to find that after redesigning her plate for better nutrition, she could still eat the foods that make her feel she’s eating a hearty meal. “I still have my meat and potatoes!”

Jackie Palmer
13, 5’6” 125 lbs.

THE PLATE SHE FIXED: Sesame chicken with white rice, fried chicken, green salad, vegetable soup, a beef taco, french fries and a slice of white bread.

NUTRITIONIST’S TAKE: Because Jackie picked salad—which she likes—and began with a bowl of vegetable soup, she was well on her way to a healthy meal. However, she chose too many fried foods and starches. With white rice, white bread and french fries, Jackie was overloaded with carbs and refined grains.

NUTRITIONIST’S MAKEOVER: Downer suggested simply paring down some of the excess fried and starchy foods, getting rid of most of the rice, bread and french fries. Downer also suggested

choosing just one kind of chicken. Jackie picked sesame, which she's unlikely to get to eat at home. Downer praised this strategy—it's a reasonable way to indulge.

JACKIE'S TAKE: "I like trying foods from different cultures."

Jordan Palmer
12, 5'3" 114 lbs.

THE PLATE HE FIXED: French fries, mini corn dogs, chocolate cake and a cinnamon bun—washed down with a glass of orange soda.

NUTRITIONIST'S TAKE: Not very nutritious. The corn dogs, like the french fries, are fried, and the rest is sugar—not a balanced meal and short on desirable nutrients. ("Jordan's not crazy about vegetables," Mechelle said.)

NUTRITIONIST'S MAKEOVER: A trip to the salad bar. Downer suggested that Jordan make salads at home to combat his vegetable resistance. "Eating vegetables has to become something other than a burden or chore for him," she said. "If he's involved with choosing and preparing the vegetables, he'll be more likely to eat them."

JORDAN'S TAKE: "I feel like my whole way of life has been changed," he said, eyeing the salad cautiously before digging in—and admitting to enjoying it.

THE FOLLOW-UP. One week later, the Palmers are paying more attention to their veggies. Mechelle has started putting extra salad on her family's plates, introducing variety by using spinach (which adds valuable vitamins) and field greens instead of just the usual romaine lettuce. Hermond says he's "been more aggressively pursuing the salad thing. I love broccoli, and I can definitely deal with string beans and collard greens." But he doubts that he'll ever leave the steak off the plate.

Jackie is happy that salad is more of a fixture at her family's table than it was before; she's now using lighter dressings and less cheese. She has also discovered new after-school snacks: celery, carrot sticks and kiwifruits instead of chips and popcorn. An avid artist, Jackie has been most inspired by Downer's point about visual variety on the plate: "I tell all my friends, 'Eat healthy—color your plate!'"

Even Jordan has started eating salad at the cafeteria at school—and he skips the ranch dressing, he says, "because it's fattening, supposedly." He still enjoys his french fries, too.

THE SCOOP ON PORTION SIZE:
Don't Go for the XXL

Most restaurants serve up portions way over what your body needs to be healthy. Controlling how much goes on your plate—and balancing food groups—is key to keeping your health and weight in

line. Some tips:

Practice measuring servings at home a few times so you get the hang of eyeballing portion sizes. Two thirds of your plate should be grains and vegetables. The Department of Agriculture has a website listing the number of servings of each food group you should eat daily for your age and size (mypyramid.gov).

A serving of meat, fish, poultry or beans should be no more than 3 ounces—about the size of a deck of cards or, for a fish fillet, a checkbook. For an adult, the recommended daily total of these items is 5 ounces for women, 6 for men (individually adjustable depending on your size and exercise habits). By contrast, a Double Quarter Pounder with Cheese weighs in at 9.8 ounces (that's nearly three servings of meat in one sandwich).

A serving of vegetables or fruit should be about the size of a baseball; a serving of cooked rice, pasta or potato should be about half a baseball.

Portion size takes practice. If you overindulge, work it off with a very long walk (or better yet, a run). How much you exercise affects how much you should eat.

PLATE THIS
Your dish can help you control your portions.

Kay Illingworth, a British woman who wanted to lose weight, designed these attractive diet plates with outlines showing correct portion sizes. The plate comes in versions appropriate for men, women and children. Check them out or order one (for about $35) from thedietplate.com. The website also offers a bowl with outlines showing correct portions for breakfast cereals (notoriously hard to gauge) and portion-control info and tips.

THE BUFFET: A USER'S GUIDE
Smart eating starts before you put a single item on your plate. Dr. Downer offers these tips:

Walk around the buffet stations and make sure you've seen everything before you start filling your plate.

Take bite-size portions if there are many things you want to try. You can always go back for more.

Choose foods you rarely have at home, and pass on those that you regularly eat.

Choose lighter dressings for salads and diet soda (or better yet, water) for beverages. Drinks and creamy salad dressings can do you in. Oil and vinegar are great and heart-healthy. (Hermond, a former soft drink fiend, drinks diet soda with a splash of juice for added flavor. He also drinks water religiously.)

Indulge occasionally in anything fried, scalloped, au gratin, breaded, battered or cooked in butter. You can eat them once in a while, in small portions. Your best bet is to choose baked, broiled, stir-fried or grilled fish and lean cuts of meat and opt for raw, steamed, roasted, sautéed or grilled vegetables.

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