Food For Thought

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Informed consumers make healthier choices eating in or dining out.

Understanding the nutritional content of food is important, says Lauren Mitchell, a senior in dietetics. She summarized current research as part of her “Fast Food Findings” presentation in a food science and human nutrition communications class.

Mitchell found that about half of fast food restaurants provide customers with nutritional information, but not on the menu. She found that customers don’t look at the nutritional information if it’s not on the menu.

In fact, the studies she reviewed showed that only six people out of 4,311 actually read the information posted on walls or the counter before ordering. Her solution—post the calorie content beside each menu item.

“I think people will still eat out even if the calories are posted, but they may choose smaller serving sizes,” Mitchell says. The articles she reviewed indicated that most families choose fast food because it’s convenient, inexpensive and they like the taste of the food. She also found that 25 percent of Americans eat out every day and spent 49 percent of their food budget outside the home in 2006.

The key to eating nutritional meals, Mitchell says, is planning. If you do eat out, she suggests choosing healthier options, smaller portions and reading the nutritional information. Although she eats fast food on occasion, she prefers to cook her meals. She believes there’s a general misconception in today’s culture that it’s difficult to cook.

“If you can read a recipe, you can cook,” Mitchell says.

She attributes her love for food to her large family and nine years of cooking and exhibiting food projects through 4-H. She’s also a proponent of taking time to eat three meals a day.

“Eating is more than nourishing your body,” Mitchell says. “When people talk about their favorite memories, most of those are tied to food.”

Since she transferred from Iowa Central Community College she’s visited a Meredith test kitchen and volunteered at the Food and Wine Expo in Des Moines. She also became one of the first peer mentors in the food science and human nutrition department’s transfer student learning community. This year, Mitchell is excited to work as a teaching assistant for the Pasta Pasta Cooking Workshop. She’s also been involved in Collegiate 4-H, the Student Dietetic Association and the culinary science club.

Mitchell says she’s undecided about her plans after she completes her internship next year. She has an interest in serving as a community-based dietician, which means she would be working to change eating behaviors at the community level or helping people understand the nutritional information on labels and in restaurants.

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**Italian Cream Cake**

From the kitchen of: Lauren Mitchell

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Food For Thought

Dietetics Student Examines Fast Food Trade-Off

By Barbara McBreen

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Lauren Mitchell, a senior in dietetics, researched and presented information about fast food. She believes listing calories beside menu items would help consumers make informed choices.