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New Year's Dieters Find Ally at the Drive-Thru

New, light-dining menu options at fast-food restaurants can help dieters keep their 2004 resolutions

SAN DIEGO - Before the clock strikes midnight on New Year's Eve, more than 50 million Americans will resolve to shape up and eat right in the coming year. For die-hard dieters, this perennial urge to purge pounds usually means replacing favorites like pizza and burgers with celery sticks and rice cakes. But with fast-food restaurants adding lighter fare to their menus in 2003, keeping a weight-loss resolution in 2004 means dieters can still enjoy a meal at their favorite burger place.

"Despite its reputation, there's no reason why fast food can't be a part of a sensible, balanced diet," said Dave Allen, a nutritionist with Jack in the Box® restaurants. "And with new customization options, consumers now have more choices and more control over how and what they eat."

Allen cites the new low-carb, bun-less option that Jack in the Box is rolling out, which allows customers to eliminate the bun and sauce on any of the chain's burgers and sandwiches, as one way weight watchers can customize their meal. Instead of a bun, the burger or sandwich is served in a plastic container with a knife and fork.

"Low-carb, high-protein diets are extremely popular right now," said Allen. "Serving our sandwiches without the bun enables our guests to customize their meal. And for someone following a low-carb diet, the bun-less option significantly reduces the carbohydrates."

For those with less carnivorous cravings, many fast-food restaurants have added entree-sized salads to their menus, which are ideal for individuals looking to pack some nutritional punch into their fast-food lunch.

In April, Jack in the Box introduced Jack's Ultimate Salads™. Available in three distinct styles - Asian Chicken, Chicken Club and Southwest Chicken - Jack's new salads offer consumers a high-quality, delicious meal loaded with flavor and a generous serving of fresh produce and nutritious ingredients.

"Our new entree-size salads offer consumers 4-5 servings of vegetables per salad," said Allen. "With the dressing and additional toppings served on the side, guests can customize their salad to their taste and appetite. If calories are a concern, using just a small amount of dressing, or a low-fat version like our balsamic vinaigrette, and omitting nuts and croutons can help keep your meal light."

If bun-less burgers and salads sound too much like "diet" food, Allen suggests the following tips to keep taste buds and waistlines happy in the drive-thru lane:

- Say no to mayo. Omitting a tablespoon of mayonnaise can skim 100 calories and 12 fat grams off your favorite sandwich.
- Hold the cheese. Leaving a slice of cheese off a hamburger can save about 90 calories and eight grams of fat, or more.
- Think red. Ask for extra tomatoes on your hamburger for a nutritional boost.
- Choose a diet soda, or better yet, water to accompany your meal.
- Go for the cluck. Grilled chicken sandwiches are usually lower in fat and calories than burgers.

- Bigger isn't necessarily better, so keep an eye on portion sizes.
- Surf the Web. Jack in the Box, like many restaurants, provides a nutritional breakdown of its menu items on its Web site.

Allen said the key to maintaining a healthy diet is moderation, not deprivation: "It's important to remember that there are no bad foods. Consumers just need to educate themselves about how to select the most nutritious menu items when eating out."

Jack in the Box Inc. (NYSE: JBX) operates and franchises two restaurant chains, Jack in the Box® and Qdoba Mexican Grill®, in 31 states combined. Jack in the Box is the nation's first major drive-thru hamburger chain, with more than 1,940 restaurants, and Qdoba Mexican Grill is an emerging leader in fast-casual dining, with more than 120 restaurants. With headquarters in San Diego, Jack in the Box Inc. has more than 44,000 employees. For more information, visit www.jackinthebox.com.