**America's Top 10 Healthiest Fast Food Restaurants**

Health magazine rates the top 10 healthiest fast food restaurants in America, based on their efforts to provide nutritious fare.

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by Dan Winters (adapted to 7.1)

Who hasn’t unwrapped a sandwich while driving down the highway or pulled into a fast-food joint on the way home from a late meeting or soccer game? We almost live in our cars, so we need quick food, and please, we’d like it to be healthy.

Well, guess what: We surveyed the nation’s 100 largest fast-food chains and found many have menus that look more and more like what we’d cook at home, if we had the time. They sell nutritious soups and healthy salads, fresh whole grains, and sensible desserts. Even better: They’re offering Mexican, Asian, and Mediterranean choices.

Using criteria that was created with the help of our expert panel, we scored the chains on such factors as the use of

* healthy fats,
* healthy salt content,
* availability of nutritional information, and
* the use of organic produce.

This survey identified the 10 highest-ranking restaurants.

One big surprise: A traditional fast-food chain, McDonalds, made our top 10. Sure, it’s the home of the Big Mac, but did you know it also serves yogurt-and-granola parfait? Here are the Top Ten that turn fast food into healthy food.

**#1 Panera Bread**

Over 1,230 locations nationwide (and in Canada)

This bakery and café amazed our judges with its healthy choices for every meal. “Variety makes it easy for everyone to choose healthy,” praises Marisa Moore, one of the judges. She is a registered dietician and knows about healthy choices. You can pick from two whole-grain breads for your sandwich and have an apple with it instead of chips. If you want baked chips, they are healthy, too. Half-size soups, salads, and sandwiches make it easier to cut down on calories. Also, most of the chicken doesn’t contain things like antibiotics or hormones, which is unusual for restaurants.

Panera also got points for its kids’ meals. They have squeezable organic yogurt, PB&J (with all-natural peanut butter), and grilled organic cheese on white whole-grain bread.

We love: Delicious, nutritious combos like a half–Turkey Artichoke on focaccia bread with a bowl of black bean or garden vegetable soup.

Danger zone: Sticky buns and cheese danishes are on display at the counter.

**#2 Jasons Deli**

206 locations in the West, Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, South

How did this deli get second place? Mainly because of its commitment to organic food. About one-fifth of all its ingredients are organic. For example, they serve blue-corn tortilla chips, whole-wheat wraps, field greens, and spinach. They offer appealing salads. The Nutty Mixed-Up Salad has organic field greens, grapes, chicken breast, feta cheese, walnuts, dried cranberries, pumpkinseeds, raisins, and organic apples.

Our judges praised the portion-control choice. Smaller sizes are $1 less. Jasons’ menu also highlights “ultrahealthy” sandwiches and provides the nutitional info.

We love: Being able to make any sandwich on an organic whole-wheat wrap.

Danger zone: High-salt counts on some sandwiches; if salt is a worry, stick to the “ultrahealthy” choices.

**#3 Au Bon Pain**

280 locations nationwide

One of the first to offer healthy fast food was Au Bon Pain. This restaurant serves sandwiches, soups, salads, and hot meals made with whole grains and veggies. They only use chicken that hasn’t been injected with hormones.

They recently added 14 different nutritious “small portion” options: snacks like apples, blue cheese, and cranberries; and salads like chickpea and tomato. All are less than 200 calories each. Another great feature: Customers can use computer screens in the restaurant to find nutritional information on each menu item. Before you even order, you know each option’s calories, fat, and salt.

“It’s a great way to inform customers,” says judge Amy Jamieson-Petonic.

We love: low-cal soups such as *Jamaican Black Bean* and *Fire Roasted Exotic Grains and Vegetables.*

Danger zone: The sodium (salt) counts can get high if you don’t pay attention.

**#4 Noodles and Company**

204 locations in West, Midwest, South

Noodles and Company cuts out the grease. They only use healthy soybean oil in cooking. Here, you choose from three food types: Asian, Mediterranean, or American. Within each style, you can pick from four noodle bowl options. They use meats that are low in fat. They also use meats from animals that haven’t been given hormones or antibiotics.

They sell tasty combos like Japanese Pan Noodles with broccoli, carrots, shiitake

mushrooms, Asian sprouts, and sauteed beef. You can choose a regular or a small portion. The small Bangkok Curry bowl has just 250 calories.

We love: The whole-grain pasta. It’s usually hard to find whole-grain pasta when eating out.

Danger zone: The desserts. The only options are two kinds of cookies and a Rice Krispy Treat bar that has 530 calories and 19 grams of fat!

**#5 Corner Bakery Cafe**

111 locations in West, Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, South

Corner Bakery has a great breakfast menu. That is unusual for a fast food restaurant. We love the Farmers Scrambler. Eggs are scrambled with peppers, onion, mushrooms, potatoes, and Cheddar cheese. You can reduce calories by ordering it with egg whites. They serve a special kind of cold oatmeal from Europe. It contains green apples, bananas, berries, low-fat yogurt, and skim milk.

Corner Bakery also has healthy salads, sandwiches, and soups made with whole grains, fresh, lean meats, and vegetables. They also offer smaller portions to limit calories.

We love: Healthy oven-roasted chicken that comes on most pastas and salads.

Danger zone: You have to go to their Web site to get nutritional info.

**#6 Chipotle** (800+ locations nationwide)

 Chipotle gives every customer complete control over her burrito, taco, or salad because they serve food on a buffet.

And you get to use fresh, local ingredients. In fact, Chipotle won high marks for its commitment to organic foods (foods that don’t have chemicals added) and food that is grown locally. Most big chains don’t do this. Many of its entrees can be low-salt, if you choose the fajita veggies and green tomatillo salsa.

We love: Burrito Bowls, which let you skip the tortilla—and the extra carbs.

Danger zone: The dark side of a buffet is that you can go wild. So you have to limit your use of cheese and sour cream.

**#7 Atlanta Bread** (106 locations in 24 states--Southeast, West, and North)

Atlanta Bread offers skinny muffin tops. They are half the size of regular muffins. Pumpkin muffin tops have only 200 calories, compared with 320 to 640 calories for regular-size muffins. This innovative bakery also sells whole-grain bread, fresh sandwiches (including paninis), and healthy soups and salads. It earned high scores for its great sides, too, such as fire-roasted black bean and corn salad.

We love: Their entree salads. Salsa Fresca Salmon Salad is grilled wild Alaskan salmon on greens with fire-roasted black bean and corn salsa and a pineapple-mango dressing.

Danger zone: Pasta entrees at some locations are offered with bread ... that’s a whole lotta carbs!

**#8 McDonalds** (14,000 locations nationwide)

When it comes to burgers, McDonalds is leading the way in changing its menu to offer healthier items. You can now order Happy Meals with apple dippers and low-fat caramel instead of fries. You can choose low-fat milk or fruit juice instead of soda. Even their fries are now cooked in canola oil. A small fry has just 230 calories.

The Grilled Chicken Classic sandwich and wraps are healthy choices, too. They are even better if you skip the mayo or sauce. So is the salad when you choose low-fat dressing.

Registered dietician Moore notes that an Egg McMuffin, at 300 calories, is a smarter choice than other “calorie-laden biscuit breakfasts.” Judges complimented McDonalds for listing the nutritional information right on the back of its tray liners.

We love: The Snack Wraps (just 260- to 270-calories for grilled chicken). They provide protein without a lot of unwanted carbs.

Danger zone: Although McDonalds made our list, this is still the land of supersizing and giant sodas. It’s up to you to request a small.

**#9 Einstein Bros. Bagels** (649 locations nationwide)

Bagels are pretty high-carb. But slathering cream cheese or butter on them is what gets you into trouble. Don’t worry. At Einstein Bros., you can get healthier choices like reduced-fat shmears, hummus, and peanut butter. These are great ways to add healthy fat to breakfast (or lunch). They also serve a Good Grains bagel that has lots of fiber.

Are you in the mood for a salad? You can order a half-size. For kids, our panel of judges liked the bagel dog. You can order it with fruit salad.

We love: The high-fiber Veg Out on a sesame seed bagel.

Danger zone: “Overstuffed” size sandwiches are a calorie nightmare.

**#10 Taco Del Mar** (270 locations in 22 states)

Baja-style Mexican cuisine is a growing trend. Baja-style means fresh ingredients and fish instead of beef and chicken. They serve whole-wheat tortillas as well as plain ones. The restaurant gets a high score for its 320-calorie chicken burrito. Our judges liked that Taco Del Mar bans lard from its beans and bakes its fish and taco shells instead of frying them.

We love: The 460- to 555-calorie Mondito-size burrito, which fills you up but keeps fat and sodium low.

Danger zone: The breakfasts. In particular, steer clear of the Mondo Breakfast Burritos, which are more than 1,000 calories.