

Whose meal is it anyway?

With the state of the economy taking top billing these days, many other issues have been relegated to the back burner. As Canadians become more obsessed with the rising economic storm, it's hard to imagine how anything else can be as pressing. But foodservice operators have to deal with a slew of important issues and they can't afford to forget that.

In recent years, the foodservice industry has been bombarded by activists calling for it to promote healthier dining or risk legislation. Of course, our industry is accustomed to change — who doesn't remember the tumultuous battle over non-smoking legislation? Well, the battle didn't end there, as there's a big drive to eradicate trans fats, as well as a push for mandatory nutritional labelling on chain-restaurant menus (*see story on pg. 27*).

While many restaurants currently provide nutritional information — some in the form of menu boards, others on websites — the industry has resisted the call to include it on its actual menus, where activists contend it would have the most impact on customer behaviour.

From a restaurant's perspective, that's easy to understand. The very nature of restaurants — with daily specials and creative use of ingredients — makes it onerous and challenging to include every single ingredient used in a dish — not to mention the need for regular updates. Restaurateurs have every right to ask where personal responsibility factors into the equation. Don't consumers bear responsibility to inform and educate themselves as to what constitutes a calorie-laden meal, or a less-than-healthy option? Does it matter that consumers continue to demand and purchase such meals? Can we as a society afford to impose legislation every time research brings new information to light?

Still, it's hard to ignore the continued evolution of



the industry and the direction activists want to lead it. In the U.S., some are pushing for the imposition of a "fat" tax. The battle even made it to the pages of *The New York Times*, where a professor of psychology at Yale University points to the sin tax on cigarettes and alcohol and suggests government should consider similar taxation of low-nutrition foods as well as banning commercials for fatty snacks targeted for children. His premise is that, "Congress and State legislatures could shift focus to the environment by taxing food with little nutritional value." Fatty foods would be judged on their nutritional value per calorie or gram of fat.

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Though restaurant operators may shake their heads in disbelief, activists are getting attention and support. It doesn't help that the industry suffers from the perception it's not doing its fair share to promote healthy meals and be a responsible corporate citizen. Advocates like Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition food studies and public health at New York University, contend the industry has been reluctant to accept the role it plays, and it has been resistant to taking any responsibility. (For example, the fast-food industry is notorious in its use of sodium.)

So what's an operator to do? While there are no clear-cut solutions that will please everyone, the industry needs to act responsibly and do everything possible to offer healthy choices, and be perceived as such. As always, operators need to understand what customers want. More importantly, they need to be seen as responsible corporate citizens. At the very least, that means providing healthier choices, being mindful of portion size and reducing sodium levels.

Additionally, perhaps operators need to better promote these initiatives so customers understand and trust what's being offered, without feeling the need for detailed nutritional analysis at point of sale. Let's not forget that, ultimately, consumers have to shoulder responsibility for their own choices if healthy eating is, in fact, what they want. Clearly, we are living through a sea change, but it's better to take the lead and influence the kind of changes you'd like to see implemented or risk having legislation shoved down your throats.

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