



On the road with...

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Skip the katsu: Tips for guilt-free ethnic dining

You know the healthy-eating drill: chicken instead of beef, salad dressing "on the side" and no butter on your bread. But what do you do when the menu is filled with tongue-twisting terms like farfalle, forno, pho, and flan?

Here are some tips on how to enjoy ethnic foods without popping the buttons on your waistband:

Mexican

Mexican cuisine has a reputation for being the most fattening of ethnic foods because of two things: Their unlimited chips and tortillas and their use of platters instead of plates. But it is possible to eat healthy, if you remember a few defensive strategies:

•**Skip on the chips.** Each large restaurant-style chip has just 25 calories and one gram of fat. Eat the whole basket, however, and you've consumed as much fat as a half-stick of butter. Instead, grab a handful of chips and push the basket to the other side of the table.

•**Stick to the salsa.** It's very low in calories and high in antioxidants. Guacamole, on the other hand, contains nearly 30 calories per level tablespoon.

•**Ask for the bean soup.** Refried beans are loaded with a couple of tablespoons of fat, and most often its lard (a heart-risky saturated fat). To cut calories in half, request black beans or beans ala charro (bean soup) — but don't slurp up the bacon-rich broth.

•**Count the tortillas.** A small corn tortilla is almost fat-free and only 50 calories. A small flour tortilla, however, has about 100 calories and 3 grams fat. Neither is too bad, if you eat just a few.

•**Easy on the cheese.** While an excellent protein source, cheese has as much fat as fried chicken. You're actually better off ordering the chicken — rather than cheese — enchiladas.

•**Flan instead of soppapillas.** Flan (baked custard), unlike most other desserts, is served in relatively small portions.

Item	Calories	Fat	Sodium
6 chips with salsa; 2 fajitas in flour tortilla (one beef, one chicken) with lettuce, tomatoes and onions; whole pinto beans	695	28	1690

Italian

Pasta (including farfalle or bowtie pasta) is low in fat and relatively low in calories. It's the added oil, sauces, cheese and meats that make the dish fattening. Remember to:

•**Fill up on bean soup and salad.** But don't let the healthy sounding "vinaigrette" name confuse you; it's still Italian dressing at 75 calories a tablespoon.

•**Request tomato sauce.** The average dinner serving of pasta with marinara sauce contains 580 calories. Compare that to more than 1200 calories with Alfredo or Carbonara sauce. If you have to have one of the creamy sauces, ask for half the usual amount for a lighter, but still flavorful, pasta.

Defensive dining strategies

•**Beware of the sizzle.** Restaurants are notorious for brushing or pouring butter or oil on everything, but you can ask for your food to be prepared with as little as possible.

•**Order less.** Research shows that the more you are served, the more you eat. Avoid buffets. And instead of ordering a Mexican platter (often with more than 1500 calories), order a la carte to get only what you really love.

•**Be picky.** Save your appetite (and your calories) for your favorites. Nothing is forbidden on a healthy eating plan — just don't try to eat everything all in the same restaurant visit.

•**Make special requests.** It's all the extras — butters, breads, creams and cheese — that make a meal fattening. Servers can accommodate your requests, including sauces and dressings on the side, steak without the usual brushing of butter or low sodium soy sauce.

•**"Waste," not "waist."** Resist the urge to clean your plate; the restaurant staff will gladly do it for you after you leave.

•**Plan ahead.** Call the restaurant during off hours and speak to the manager, who should be able to offer details about all the menu items and how to make them healthier — most often better than your server could.

•**Avoid fried foods.** Stay away from the popular fried fish and fried stuffed chicken drumettes. Instead, select from the wide variety of meats, fish and shellfish that are grilled, simmered, braised or stewed.

	Calories	Fat	Sodium
Large bowl of Pho	655	11	1840

Thai

Thai restaurants include many healthy, flavorful options. As with other Asian cuisine, you'll want to avoid the fried foods, order fewer dishes than the number of guests, and ask them to use as little oil as possible in the preparation. In addition:

•**Be careful with coconut milk.** Coconut milk, often added to curries, contains about 500 calories a cup with 50 grams of fat. Instead of adding rice to the curry, scoop the "stuff" out of the curry and add just a small amount of the "juice". Country style refers to curries prepared without coconut milk.

	Calories	Fat	Sodium
Spring roll (non-fried) with 1-tablespoon of hoison-peanut sauce, pad Thai (2 cups)	841	33	1200

Indian

Indian cuisine offers many healthy foods including a wide variety of vegetarian and vegan options including dal (lentils or beans). Ask for a curry made with yogurt instead of coconut milk, cream or condensed milk. In addition:

•**Skip the appetizers.** Most of the appetizers — including samosas, pappadum, and pakoras — are fried. Instead, select one of the raw vegetable salads or Mulligatawny soup (lentil soup).

•**Select tandoori.** Meats cooked in a tandoor (clay oven) are lean choices.

•**Spice it up.** Many of the condiments, including chutney and raita (yogurt-based), are low fat.

	Calories	Fat	Sodium
Mulligatawny soup, 1cup of vegetable pullaó, 1 cup vegetable curry made with yogurt, tandoori roasted chicken breast, chapati (pita bread)	800	28	1910

Middle Eastern

The Middle Eastern diet — based on olive oil, avocados and other vegetables — is considered to be one of the healthiest. But like anything else, too much of a good thing can still pack on pounds. Here's how you can keep it light:

•**Make a meal of appetizers.** While falafel and spankopita are high in fat, you can make a meal of baba ghanoush (smoked eggplant), hummus (mashed chickpeas), dolma (stuffed grape leaves), and tabooli (cracked wheat salad).

•**Request no oil.** Olive oil is often poured on the baba ghanoush, hummus, and other foods. Get it on the side, if you want some.

	Calories	Fat	Sodium
Hummus and baba ghanoush (without oil), shish kebobs with chicken, plain couscous, pita bread	880	30	1100

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Dr. Jo helps busy people stay healthy, sane and productive through her books, articles, media appearances, speaking engagements and Web site, www.drjo.com. She has written *Dining Lean*, *How to Stay Healthy & Fit on the Road* and *Dr. Jo's No Big Deal Diet*. Tell her what you think of her latest column by sending her an e-mail at travel@usatoday.com. Include your name, hometown and daytime phone number, and she may use your feedback in a future column.