

South Los Angeles Neighborhood *Mercado* Pioneers Smart Menu Labeling among Non-Chain Restaurants

In Mercado La Paloma, an oasis of home cooking in the “food desert” of South Los Angeles, seven independent restaurants serve traditional cuisines of diverse communities, from Thai and Persian to Mexican and Peruvian. *Paloma*, Spanish for “dove,” symbolizes hope—and at this bright and airy community marketplace, doves depicted in colorful tabletop mosaics and etched into the parking lot pavement outside serve as a fitting symbol for an optimistic band of small business owners committed to building a healthy community, one meal at a time.

As a result of public policy efforts to address California’s obesity epidemic, state law now requires big chain restaurants to disclose nutrition information at point-of-purchase. Though not covered by that mandate, some smaller independent restaurants are nevertheless joining the movement to provide calorie counts and other nutrition information for all of their standard menu items. Their grassroots efforts are supported by The California Endowment-funded Healthy Eating, Active Communities (HEAC), in collaboration with the County of Los Angeles Department of Public Health.

“Research shows that menu labeling can be an effective step toward preventing obesity,” says Pri de Silva, MSW, program coordinator for South L.A. HEAC. “By offering nutrition information to consumers when they are ordering, individuals are empowered to choose meals that fit their diet and lifestyle.”

Through its innovative program, branded Smart Menu/*La Salud Tiene Sabor*, South L.A. HEAC has provided restaurants with professional analysis of recipes and guidance in creating new menu signs listing nutritional factors, in the process promoting “nutritional literacy” and helping business owners play an active role in the health of their community.

“Our goal is to explore the linkages between economic development opportunities and public health,” says Beth Weinstein, Director of Economic Development for Esperanza Community Housing Corporation which owns the building, leasing space to tenants of the Mercado on the ground floor and to nonprofit organizations upstairs. “The foods offered here are fresh and healthy, sit-down meals, in contrast to the many fast food



Local activists helped restaurant owners at Mercado La Paloma provide nutrition information to their customers.

outlets surrounding us. The restaurants cater to a diverse clientele. During the week we get a large lunch crowd, which includes people going to the DMV, people who work at USC, neighboring businesses, and nonprofits. During evenings and weekends we attract more locals and members of communities tied to a particular cuisine, for example, the Yucatecan community.”

Crucial to the project’s success was developing one-on-one relationships with the restaurant owners based on a solid understanding of their business models.

“You can’t approach this process with only the *health* message, without being mindful of the *business* aspect,” notes Monica Montes, a registered dietician and co-founder of NEW Health

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Consultants, focused on educating individuals and groups to achieve optimal health, in both the corporate and nonprofit sector. “It was critical that we framed Smart Menu/*La Salud Tiene Sabor* as a good business decision, part of a growing new business trend. We had to earn the owners’ trust and confidence. It is, after all, the source of their livelihood.”

By taking time to sit down and talk in depth with individual restaurant owners—“whenever was convenient for them, whether seven in the morning or ten at night”—Montes demonstrated that she was looking out for their best interests and soon every one of the seven restaurants had signed on to the program.

Ultimately Montes and her colleagues analyzed over 600 recipes a total of four times each, as they worked with owners on modifying them. To carry out the analysis, she needed to know the exact ingredients and amounts for each recipe. “In many cases, these were traditional recipes that had never even been written down,” says Montes. “As experienced cooks they were used to adding a pinch of this and a pinch of that, a handful more of something else. So we worked with them to standardize their menus. We started scooping and measuring with cups to help them get more accurate about calories and fat.”

When the owners received the first results of the nutritional analysis a few were shocked to discover the amount of calories in some of the dishes they were serving. Others were pleased to learn that their menu was already nutritious and well balanced. They all began to realize the cost of using more or less of certain ingredients and how those costs could be better controlled through standardized measurement, reduced portion sizes, and healthy substitutions (for example, replacing carbohydrates with vegetables)—with positive business benefits for them and positive health benefits for their patrons.

“With each new round of analysis, the owners got more excited and took more pride in their product,” says Montes, “and they also began to look at their customers differently. Not only did they come to understand the seriousness of diabetes, heart disease, and other conditions, but they began picturing what a healthier world might look like, and how they might contribute to that type of change. One of the vendors went above and beyond the program and decided to create a low-cal menu.”

Each owner received the final result of the nutritional analysis in the form of a bound recipe book that includes a complete listing of carefully measured ingredients, and a nutrition label for

each menu item like that found on food products sold in stores.

Each of the businesses also received “a little face lift,” Montes adds, noting that most owners were so busy with operations, they never had time to think about things like graphic design. The program brought in a graphic designer to work with the vendors to update their menu boards to include calorie information. Some vendors decided to take this opportunity and overhaul their menu boards, which required a financial contribution from their end.

In April 2009, Smart Menu/*La Salud Tiene Sabor* was officially launched with a community celebration at the Mercado. Calorie information is now available to patrons via menu boards and also take-away menus that carry additional nutrition information on each menu item (its contents of fat, saturated fat, trans fat, carbohydrates, fiber, sodium, and sugar), along with an explanation of what these nutrients mean and customer tips on choosing wisely when eating out.

As further testament to the program’s impact, some of the owners themselves began losing weight. “Our owner Raul lost 22 pounds,” says Montes. “All of these individuals and their families have gained lifelong nutrition skills. I don’t think they’ll ever go back to old habits. It is a new road for them as well.”

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Institutional changes will also be permanent. As a result of the menu labeling effort the Mercado and Esperanza have revised their policy so that future restaurant owners will be required to undergo the same process of Smart Menu/*La Salud Tiene Sabor* nutrition analysis, which had been optional for existing vendors.

Restaurants participating in Mercado La Paloma's Smart Menu project include Chichen Itza and its nationally recognized chef Gilberto Cetina, Burger Plaza Grill, La Maison de la Crème, Mo Chica, OxaCalifornia, Taqueria Vista Hermosa, and Thai Corner.

For more information:

Healthy Eating, Active Communities: www.healthyeatingactivecommunities.org

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