Classifying Calories

By Martin Bruegel

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STARTING this week, McDonald's is posting calorie information for all items on its menus across the United States, part of a movement to improve diets and reduce obesity by posting nutritional information. New York City has mandated that chain restaurants post calories since 2008, and the federal health care law adopted in 2010 will eventually require fast-food restaurants across the United States to do so.

While the alarm over obesity is fairly recent, the notion of using "scientific" knowledge to guide the dietary habits of ordinary people — particularly the less well off — is not. The fate of earlier campaigns suggests that it will take much more than calorie information to change food ways.

Nutritional recommendations were born at the end of the 19th century with the discovery that humans need 20 calories per pound of weight each day; 55 to 65 percent of this energy intake ought to come from carbohydrates, a quarter from fats and something over 10 percent from proteins.

These guidelines did not emerge only from scientific inquiry but also from a desire to maximize efficiency. In 1888, the American chemist Wilbur O. Atwater devised a series of formulas that would help people meet the most energy from the least food. Economics and physiology would be joined in what he called "the pecuniary economy of food." Atwater pioneered a movement that came to be known as "scientific eating." The notion appealed to French physicians, who had been looking for ways to improve working-class health and budget.

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They believed that these households spent too much on meat and alcohol. Their program of "rational eating" aimed to instruct the poor to keep food expenses within the limits of their (modest) budgets. They urged the substitution of protein-rich legumes for red meat, pasta for sausages, and sugared beverages for wine.

These reformers believed that ignorance was the problem and information the solution. Nutrition facts were put next to the items on the menu cards in factory canteens and in working-class restaurants. Scales at the entrance to eating places helped customers to monitor their weight. A menu board, listing carefully calibrated culinary options, would allow workers to assemble nutritious meals from a set of limited options.

The program flopped — except in prisons, where lower calorie supply per inmate induced savings — as French workers continued to enjoy their sausage and wine. It did manage, though, to raise eyebrows in the United States. "If Paris does not know how to eat," a Chicago newspaper asked in 1912, under the headline "Pessimism in Paris," "who would?"

Yet Americans embraced the fad. In 1914 the New York State Board of Health introduced a "scientific restaurant," where staff luncheons were made according to "the most modern dietary theories." Restaurants across the country began to list energy and protein content on their menus.

Childs Restaurants, an ancestor of today's global fast-food chains, provided "a complete lesson in dietetics, mathematics, food conservation, patience, economy, and patriotism and a meal thrown in for good" to its clientele. The demands of World War I made efficiency even more important, and Americans文化遗产的 calorie counting went too far; The New York Tribune bemoaned the "mystery cult of the calorie."

By 1920, Americans were so calorie conscious that a romance novel, Ethel M. Kelley's "Outside Inn," featured calories as a prominent theme. In 1924, the Restaurant Owners' Association toyed with providing diners with printed advice on well-balanced meals "from the point of view of calories."

None of these initiatives lasted. For European and American consumers, hearty and palatable meals outweighed scientific formulas every time.

The history of "scientific eating" offers several lessons. Nutritional campaigns can succeed in influencing consumer behavior only if they take into account the sensual joys of eating. The French continued to eat their red meat and drink their red wine because rich meals gave them a sense of belonging to a community. Similarly, Americans consumed the calorie bomb of World War II saw access to plentiful, ever cheaper and ever healthier foods as proof of the American promise — even if the impact on their waistlines, and well-being, has been disastrous.

In an era of stagnant wages, dyspeptic politics and cultural anomie, eating indulgent if unhealthy food has become a last redoubt of enjoyment for Americans who don't feel they have much control in their lives.

Higher incomes and better educations — in the classroom, not on the menu board — will do more to solve the obesity epidemic than mandating the disclosure of calorie counts. Before we blame the poor and the overweight for their inability to manage their budgets or control their appetites, we might want to think not only about the foods they encounter in the supermarket and on television but about a culture that relies even more on unhealthy foods to breathe meaning and purpose into everyday life.