Checking out fast-food menus can be a gut-busting adventure

by Michael Stetz

When it came to ordering the Burger King Quad Stacker, many questions popped into my mind.

Would the slim woman behind the counter be able to carry the jumbo burger? Might the dining table collapse under its weight? Would a surgeon general's warning be printed on the wrapper?

FAST-FOOD MENUS - What's happening to the all-American burger? It seems to be taking on a physical attribute of many Americans these days: It won't stop growing. CNS Illustration by Cristina Martinez Byvik.

More importantly, would a measly one-hour lunch give me enough time to eat this tower of cow?

The Quad Stacker is as thick as a Tom Clancy novel. It has four meat patties, four slices of cheese and eight slices of bacon, and not a word of that is a misprint.

I managed four bites - and I was really, really hungry.

What's happening to the all-American burger? It seems to be taking on a physical attribute of many Americans these days: It won't stop growing.

One might think that the movie "Super Size Me," the book "Fast Food Nation" and the nation's escalating obesity rate would have some impact on fast-food menus and customers' wants.

Well...

Sure, you can now get salads and leaner chicken sandwiches, but those items are being overshadowed by the new towering burgers. And that's no play on words. These monuments of meat can indeed cast shadows.

Just about every fast-food chain is coming up with some new, scale-busting creation to satisfy its core customers. Burgers boasting better quality and significantly larger meat patties are growing in popularity, too.

The lineup is, um, meaty:

Carl's Jr. sells something called the Double $6 Burger. It has 1,520 calories and 111 grams of fat.

Wendy's offers the three-quarter-pound Triple With Cheese, which has 970 calories and 59 fat grams.

In addition to the 1,000-calorie Quad Stacker, introduced last year, Burger King sells the Triple Whopper With Cheese, which has 1,230 calories and 82 grams of fat.

McDonald's recently began testing a new burger in Southern California called the Angus Third Pounder.

It's the biggest burger on the chain's menu and has, depending on the kind you order, 720 to 860 calories.

By comparison, the original McDonald's hamburger, which is still offered, has 250 calories.

"Oh, my God," Harold Goldstein, executive director of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, said when I gave him a meaty description of the BK Quad Stacker.

Goldstein's organization is fighting for laws that would require restaurants to put nutritional information on their menus.

Many people have no idea of the gut-busting potential of the food they're eating, Goldstein argues. Take these big sandwiches, add fries and a shake, "and you're getting a day's worth of calories."

The Hummer-sized burgers are selling well. Burger King's recent profits were better than expected, and the performance of its "premium burgers," such as the Stacker, was noted.

At a Chula Vista, Calif., Carl's Jr. color-splashed pictures of burgers take up most of the menu board. They are huge burgers, with cheese and lettuce and tomatoes and bacon spilling out.

On a window was a poster of a burger. It was 2 feet wide.

One wonders immediately: Is that actual size?

Fast-food chains say the trend isn't necessarily toward bigger but rather better quality burgers.

Jack in the Box has a new burger that's 100 percent sirloin, which the company says it is the first major chain to offer a burger made with that kind of meat.

But size apparently matters as well. In a news release, Jack in the Box noted that the burger "weighs in at one-third of a pound after cooking." The company emphasizes the "after."

Jack in the Box also sells the Bacon Ultimate Cheeseburger, which has 1,090 calories and 77 grams of fat.

"Burgers are always going to be popular, and I think people are looking for new twists," said Kathleen Anthony, a Jack in the Box spokeswoman.

I went for the new Jack in the Box sirloin burger. What the heck. The BK Quad Stacker was days ago, and I had recovered.

And...

I managed five bites this time.

Â© Copley News Service

Checking out fast-food menus can be a gut-busting adventure by Michael Stetz