EAT OUT, EAT RIGHT

You can enjoy a guilt-free meal at your favorite restaurant by simply making wise choices. Here's help from Wellness and the American Heart Association.

MEXICAN FARE
By Mary Ellen Walsh

Mexican dishes dripping with Monterey Jack cheese and sides of refried beans and sour cream are just plain fattening. Two cheese-drenched enchiladas can add up to 1,000 calories, not to mention the salt content. These combo plates are typical of American Southwestern/Tex-Mex cuisine. However, you can find healthier meals on the menu.

Matthew Lake, Executive Chef of Besito Fine Dining Mexican Restaurants (Roslyn and Huntington) says, "Authentic Mexican dishes are healthy, nutrient-dense meals already. People don't realize that the traditional salsas (sauces) or mole are vegetable-based with little fat." Lake explains, "We don't use lard as a flavor-vehicle and we cook with the highest quality, hormone-free meats, roasting all vegetables on a flat skillet known as a comal."

Traditional Mexican cuisine is as rich and varied as the landscape of the motherland, from using flour tortillas in the snow-capped mountain region, cooking cacti found in hot, arid deserts to fruits and banana leaves found in the jungles. Guacamole, tamales, chilis en nogada and enchiladas are known throughout the region.

Dating back thousands of years, meat was scarce. The advanced culture of the Aztecs used Maize (corn) and beans creating "complimentary amino acids," the building blocks of protein, as a meat substitute. The Aztecs also used squash, tomatoes, chiles, and chocolate. They are touted with being one of the first cultures to create hot cocoa—a drink for royalty. After the Spanish conquest, new foods were imported: pigs, chicken, cattle, wheat, rice and fruits.

After the fall of the Aztec Empire and continuing through Mexico's tumultuous history through the War of Independence ending in 1821, new authentic staples like Tequila, were produced and imported to other countries. During the reign of Emperor Austrian Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian (1864–1867), France influences enriched the native cuisine. Dishes like Chiles en Nogada (stuffed chiles in a walnut sauce) or Conejo en Mostaza (rabbit in mustard sauce) became popular. Soon, the flavors of Mexico found their way to Europe where chocolate, tomatoes and beans became favorites.

Find Mexican-inspired recipes at newsdaywellness.com.

Mary Ellen Walsh is a freelance writer from Syosset.

CHOOSE WISELY

American Heart Association spokesperson Layne Lieberman-Liebelson, RD, MS, CDN offers these tips for dining Mexican.

Skip refried anything! Order plain pinto or black beans without the extra iard, bacon or cheese. In restaurants offering Tex-Mex and Southwestern cuisine, order Fajita dishes with chicken, shrimp and veggies as healthier entrée choices. Burritos, soft tacos and quesadillas shells are made from flour—not fried and are your best bet. Ask for chicken or grilled veggies—hold off on the cheese.

Make a conscious choice: entrée or side dishes—not both. Use guacamole made from avocados, lime juice and seasonings—a better choice than sour cream. Choose salsa or pico de gallo, which consists of tomatoes, onions and hot peppers. When in doubt, salads are the best choice.

CAUTION: Those chips served before your meal are fried; tacos or any corn tortillas are deep fried corn shells; sour cream is loaded with trans fats.

Where to Enjoy Mexican Fare

Green Cactus Fresh Mexican Grill, Wantagh
On the Border Mexican Grill & Canta, Hicksville
Don Juan Mexican Restaurant, Westbury, Massapequa Park
La Panchita, Smithtown
Pancho Villa's, Huntington
Burrito Loco, Commack
Meson Ole, East Islip, Southampton
Antojito's Típicos Restaurant, Central Islip