

Salads are not saviours

In many restaurants, salads are the worst thing on the menu

BY AMY O'BRIAN, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE



"Salads are great as a side dish. But if you want to have them as a meal you need to add some carbs and protein to them and you need to watch the fat," Avanti says.

Photograph by: Debra Brash, Canwest News Service

Christine Avanti doesn't want to be labelled a salad hater, but she has some problems with the North American definition of a salad.

Cubes of processed ham, gobs of shredded cheese, hard-boiled egg, and a bit of lettuce all slathered in creamy dressing does not a salad make.

Yet these so-called salads have become the norm on restaurant menus and are fooling millions of people into believing they are eating well, when in fact, they are often eating more fat and calories than they would if they ordered a steak or chicken entrée with mashed potatoes and vegetables.

"We need to address this whole salad situation," Avanti said in a phone interview from her home in Los Angeles.

"Salads are sometimes the worst thing on the menu."

In reaction to the common misconception that salad is always a healthy choice -- combined with her growing frustration at other dieting misconceptions -- Avanti wrote *Skinny Chicks Don't Eat Salads*.

The eye-catching title has riled some salad devotees, but that was not Avanti's intention and, as she points out in the book, she is well aware that not all salads should be considered the enemy.

"I don't want to upset the Department of Lettuce," she joked.

"Salads are great as a side dish. But if you want to have them as a meal you need to add some carbs and protein to them and you need to watch the fat."

Avanti has seen too many women come into her Los Angeles weight-loss clinic who are under the impression that they are eating well because they stay away from carbohydrates and mainly eat salads.

"Women come in and they tell me, 'I eat really healthy. I don't have much for breakfast. I have a salad at lunch. I try to have a salad at dinner and I'm not losing weight,'" she said.

"Basically, I hear the same thing every time."

As someone who lived that diet for years, Avanti knows it is a recipe for failure. She would get so hungry in the afternoons and evenings that she would end up binging on cake, crackers, peanut butter and anything else she could find. Meanwhile, on the days when all she ate was lettuce, cucumber and low-cal dressing, she was starving herself and shutting down her metabolism -- throwing her body into survival mode.

"To eat a low-carb diet and to expect to continue to lose weight and heal your metabolism, it's just not a realistic expectation, nor is it humanly possible," she said. "Biologically, chemically, metabolically, it's just not possible."

Avanti says her plan is not a diet. Instead, it is a plan that incorporates everything from sweets to carbs to fats, but teaches people to eat well and eat in moderation.

Rather than allowing yourself to starve between meals, Avanti advocates eating four meals a day to keep blood sugar levels stable. She instructs clients to eat a combination of protein and carbs at every meal. And she encourages people to eat a diverse range of foods.

When you think about it, her plan is in the same vein as the Canada Food Guide: Eat three out of four food groups at every meal. And eat lots of fruit, vegetables and whole grains.

"People think the only way to lose weight is to starve themselves," she said.

"But really, just eat like your grandparents ate. That's what I tell people."

The protein-carb combo that Avanti advocates is a natural way to regulate blood sugar levels and therefore keep hunger and headaches at bay. She explains that when you eat carbs alone, they break down into sugars and storm into the bloodstream, bringing on highs and lows in energy, and leaving you hungry sooner.

Even something as seemingly healthy as a bowl of oatmeal with raisins is going to convert to sugar as it enters your bloodstream. But combine it with a small serving of ham or high-protein yogurt and you'll slow the sugars entering the bloodstream and stay energized longer.

"Have any kind of carbohydrate you want, just combine it with some protein and it's going to slow down the speed of that sugar going through your bloodstream," she said.

"If we can get sugar going to the bloodstream at a slower pace, we're less likely to store it as fat."

Avanti's book includes her expert nutritionist advice, exercises, quick tips, recipes and ideas for quick meals that satisfy the protein-carb combo requirement. The meal plan includes calories and serving size, but Avanti stresses that it is only a general guide. If a meal leaves you hungry, by all means, eat a bit more, she said.

"What I'm saying is not what people want to hear," she said. "Diet books are still best sellers because people want a quick fix. They want a pill or quick master cleanse."

"But really, it's all about moderation and keeping it healthy."

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Meal ideas in *Skinny Chicks Don't Eat Salads*:

- Bruschetta Chicken Wrap

- No-Fry Chicken Fried Rice

- Pasta and Spicy Red Sauce

- Creamy Lemon Basil Chicken Linguine

- Sicilian-Style Chicken and Rice

- Steak with Mushroom Sauce and Mashed Potatoes

- Raspberry Chambord Trifle

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