

# Frozen Promises

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**W**hether you're counting carbs or vegetables, protein or calories, fat or fibre, there's a line of frozen dinners for you. Or so it appears.

Some brands don't quite live up to their promises. Others keep their end of the bargain, but at a cost (usually to your blood pressure).

Either way, frozen entree boxes are loaded with enough claims to give you brain freeze. Here's how to see past the slogans and buzzwords to find the best frozen meals.

## Most of the Salt?

"We need sodium to help maintain our body's fluid balance, but too much can be unhealthy," says the Café Classics Citrus Glazed Chicken package. "That's why our chefs at Lean Cuisine replace most of the salt in our meals with flavourful herbs and spices to create delicious tasting meals that are also good for you!"

Finally. A major frozen dinner maker is cutting back on salt. And, in fact, the Glazed Chicken has only 400 milligrams of sodium in each 310-calorie bowl.

But "replace most of the salt in our meals"? Hardly.

It's easier to curb the salt in a sweet dish like Glazed Chicken or a sweet-and-spicy one like Mango Curry Chicken (550 mg) than in entrees like Santa Fe Chicken (710 mg), Sesame Chicken (740 mg), Creamy Chicken Alfredo (750 mg), and Chicken Teriyaki (760 mg).

Maybe that's why only the Glazed Chicken warns customers that when it comes to sodium, "too much can be unhealthy." (The other Café Classics carry health tips about vegetables, portion sizes, bones, and other topics.) Seven of the nine Café Classics have too much sodium to earn a Best Bite or Honourable Mention in our frozen-dinner rating (see "Cold Comfort," p. 13).

The good news: most are low in saturated-plus-trans fat and have at least some vegetables (the packages say one serving, but we found about half that much in the two dozen entrees we dissected).

But herbs and spices instead of most of the salt? Not quite.



## Don't Feed the Meter

Swanson Carb-Meter labels are coy. Health Canada doesn't allow foods to claim that cutting carbs can cut flab. Nor can labels subtract fibre from carbohydrates to get "net carbs"—the "only ones that impact blood sugar," as Swanson's Web site puts it. (Translation: the company wants you to think that it has gotten rid of most of the carbs that make people fat.)

So Swanson relies on the name "Carb-Meter," a photo of a woman with a tape measure around her (rather slim) waist, and a red-white-and-blue circle that discloses carbs and fibre on the front of the package. Impressed? Don't be.

The carbs may be low, but two of the four flavours (Grilled Turkey Medallions and Cheddar Chili) have just 2 or 3 grams of fibre, a paltry amount for a 200-calorie entree.

Fortunately, the entire Carb-Meter line promises two servings of vegetables, according to the Web site (we didn't check). Unfortunately, the sodium runs about 1,000 mg, but that's par for the salty course in frozen-dinner territory.

Memo to shoppers: labels can disclose numbers for anything (fibre, fat, calories, whatever), as long as they don't use words like "only" or "rich in" to make the number sound low or high. So don't assume it's either.

Instead, check the new Nutrition Facts panel, which will be mandatory for most packaged foods by mid-December. It tells you what per cent of a day's worth (the Daily Value) of fibre, fat, etc., the food supplies.



## Say Ignite, Gracie

“Ignite frozen meals were designed with serious athletes and active Canadians in mind,” says Campbell’s Web site.



That explains why the packages say: “Ignite meals are specially designed to provide 30 g of protein to help build and repair muscle tissue. Ignite contains 16 essential nutrients including: thiamine, niacin and riboflavin, to help your body use food energy. As

part of a balanced diet and healthy lifestyle, the nutrients in Ignite meals help contribute to good health...ready, set!”

Wow! Sounds like anyone who wants to work out at the gym or start a new exercise routine had better stock the freezer with Ignites. Otherwise, who knows what would happen to those unrepaired muscles and that unused food energy?

Not much.

Most Canadians already get plenty of protein. And Ignite’s three B-vitamins—thiamine, niacin, and riboflavin—are in enriched flour, so people get more than enough from bread, crackers, pizza dough, and dozens of other foods. So why boast about them?

Check out the “biological role” claims that Health Canada allows companies to put on their packages. Protein “helps build and repair body tissues.” Thiamine “releases energy from carbohydrate.” And niacin and riboflavin are each a “factor in energy metabolism.” Could Campbell have picked those nutrients because their claims sound like they’d be good for athletes?

If you’re looking for a higher-protein meal with 400 to 450 calories, Ignite delivers. It’s got some flaws—most varieties are high in sodium (around 900 mg). But to their credit, each Ignite delivers roughly 10 grams of fibre (the Indian Vegetable Masala has an impressive 26 grams) and promises two servings (1 cup) of vegetables (we didn’t check).

Too bad the company had to rev up the protein-and-B-vitamins hype to try to jack up sales.

## Making Better Better

“Better choices for you and your family,” says the small B print that goes with the (big print) “Lifestyle” symbol on Michelina’s Salad Bowls, Avantage, and Lifestyle lines.

It’s no sweat to keep a promise that vague. Health Canada has no rules to define “better,” so the company gets to decide what it means. As far as we can tell, “better” means Mama Michelina has cut the fat and calories but couldn’t care less about the sodium.

What’s more, each Michelina line leaves something out, so you may wind up with even more salt before you’re done eating:

■ **Lifestyle** entrees (600 to 1,200 mg of sodium) are typically lean protein (like chicken or meat) plus carbs (like pasta or rice) with just a smattering of vegetables.

■ **Avantage** meals (500 to 1,000 mg of sodium) up the protein and replace the carbs with veggies. They’re lower in sat fat than some other lower-carb meals, which makes them more South Beach than Atkins.

■ **Salad Bowls** (600 to 1,200 mg of sodium) drop the protein and carbs, leaving only vegetables plus salty dressing. (You can eat them hot or cold.)



You can make Michelina’s better by rounding out your

meal—face it, you’re going to need more than 150 to 350 calories—without boosting the salt. For example, add tofu or fresh cooked poultry or fish (not ham or tuna) to the Salad Bowls, fresh vegetables (seasoned without salt or salad dressing) to the Lifestyle, and whole-grain pasta or rice (not bread or rolls) to the Avantage meals (of course then they’d no longer be low-carb).

Nice work on the fat and vegetables, Mama. But when it comes to salt, you could do better.

## Get the Blues

“High in dietary fibre,” says the label on President’s Choice Indian Chicken Korma. True enough. Each meal has 5 grams of fibre, according to the package.

Too bad the label doesn’t also say “high in saturated fat.” With 12 grams—more than half a day’s worth—it wouldn’t hurt to give consumers some warning. Likewise, President’s Choice Organics Cannelloni is indeed “a source of dietary fibre” (6 grams). But you spend 1,360 mg of sodium—over half a day’s worth—to get it.

For healthier frozen dinners, try President’s Choice new Blue Menu line. The front labels explain what features you



can expect—most are low in fat and calories. Expect 400 to 800 mg of sodium in most entrees, but it could be a lot worse. President’s Choice’s (non-Blue-Menu) Chinese General Tao

Chicken has 1,970 mg of sodium. When experts recommend no more than 2,400 mg for an entire day (1,500 mg for anyone middle-aged or older), isn’t that just a bit excessive, Mr. President?

The take home message: companies put their best foot forward. Don’t get carried away with the “organic,” “high fibre,” or “low calorie” claims on the front of the package without checking out the smaller print on the back. 🍌