

ITALIAN RESTAURANT FOOD

Belly-ssimo!

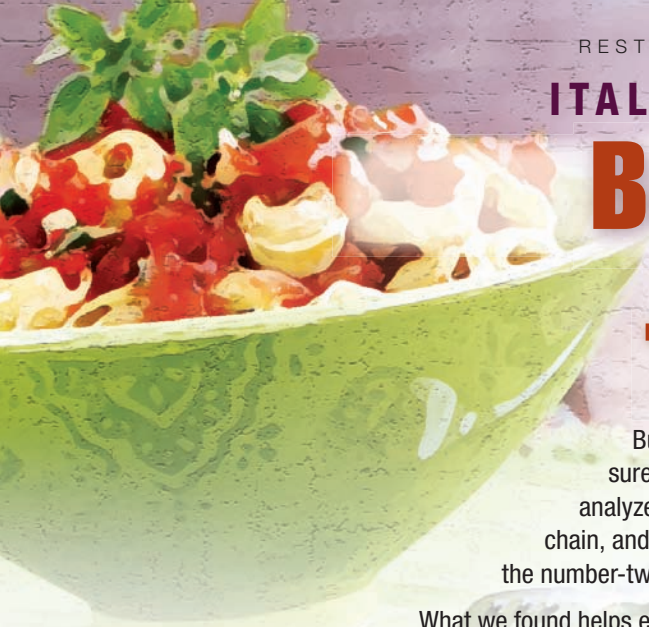
BY JAYNE HURLEY & BONNIE LIEBMAN

There's nothing more American than Italian food. Dishes like spaghetti, pizza, and lasagna are fixtures in our kitchens and our restaurants.

But what's the cost—to our waistlines, our arteries, and our blood pressure—when we go out for Italian? To get a handle on a typical menu, we analyzed popular dishes from Olive Garden, the leading sit-down Italian restaurant chain, and we examined nutrition facts available online from Romano's Macaroni Grill, the number-two chain.

What we found helps explain why many of us have taken on the shape of a meatball, with arteries that resemble stuffed manicotti. A traditional Mediterranean diet—low in saturated fat and rich in fruits and vegetables—may be a lifesaver. But most U.S. Italian restaurant food is more like a lead weight.

Information compiled by Danielle Hazard.



Olive Garden's Web site discloses calories, total fat, and fiber (though not saturated fat or sodium) for half a dozen lower-fat items from its lighter, Garden Fare menu. But the rest of the menu is pretty much a mystery.

So we made composites of dinner-size portions of more than a dozen popular dishes bought at three Olive Garden restaurants in the Washington, D.C., area and sent them to an independent laboratory for analysis. Our numbers should reflect about what you'd get at any of Olive Garden's 568 locations.

And what you get, except for the low-fat Garden Fare items, is a bellyful of calories and saturated fat and a hefty shot of sodium. And while those are our Pans, even some of our Picks aren't for the faint of blood pressure.

Antipasti (Appetizers)

We don't have numbers for the appetizers, but you can expect a load of calories and saturated fat from the three cheeses in the Stuffed Mushrooms, the four cheeses in the Smoked Mozzarella Fonduta, and the cream cheese in the Hot Artichoke-Spinach Dip. And don't expect to slim down on the deep-fried Calamari either.

Zuppe e Insalate (Soups & Salads)

Every entrée comes with salad or soup. To keep calories in check, stick to the salad with low-fat Italian dressing on the side. (The dressing isn't on the menu. You have to ask for it.)

If you want soup, Minestrone has the least saturated fat, and a cup has only 160 calories. (But odds are it's loaded with sodium.) Just watch the unlimited supply

of breadsticks, which are slathered with butter and garlic salt before they reach your table.

Cucina Classica (Classic Recipes)

Most "Classics" have at least 1,000 calories.

PICKS

Linguine alla Marinara. This dish of "pasta with a zesty blend of ripe tomatoes, onions and herbs" has only 550 calories, according to Olive Garden's Web site. It must be hard to measure out pasta precisely; our lab analysis found 790 calories. Still, for a restaurant entrée, that's not bad. And the bad fat (2 grams) is darn good.

Capellini Pomodoro. Roma tomatoes, garlic, fresh basil, and extra-virgin olive oil tossed with capellini pasta has only 2 grams of bad fat. But our analysis found 990 calories, considerably more than the 640 calories that Olive Garden promises. Looks like the chain doesn't make sure that its kitchen staff limits portion sizes. Warning: our analysis—which included every drop of sauce—found a blood-pressure-rattling 1,900 mg of sodium.

Sodium

Sodium is a major cause of heart disease and strokes. But sodium numbers are less reliable than calories and saturated fat because sodium varies more from one restaurant (or one day) to another. So we ignored sodium in choosing our "Picks" for both chains. Clearly, though, Italian restaurant food—like almost all restaurant food—is too salty across the menu.



PANS

Spaghetti & Meatballs. Sugar aside, how do two Big Macs plus a 21-ounce Coke sound?

Five Cheese Ziti al Forno. Why bother with the ziti pasta? Between the five-cheese marinara sauce and the "layer of melted Italian cheeses," you might as well just order a plate of cheese. It accounts for the 26 grams of bad fat and many of the 1,190 calories. The dish may seem lighter than the lasagna because it's meatless, but there's nothing light about it.



Lasagna Classico. You'd have to eat an entire 2½-pound box of Stouffer's Family Size Lasagna with Meat & Sauce to get close to the 28 grams of bad fat that are in one order of Olive Garden's lasagna. Yes, people go to restaurants for a little splurge. But it would be nice if the menu clued you in to the 1½ days' worth of bad fat and the 1,060 calories in this particular splurge.

Fettuccine Alfredo. According to Olive Garden's Web site, Alfredo sauce is made with milk, heavy cream, Parmesan cheese, Romano cheese, and egg yolks. That explains the 33 grams of bad fat and many of the 1,200 calories. Let's hope Alfredo knew a good cardiologist.

Pasta Ripiena (Filled Pastas)

The pasta's not the only thing that gets stuffed.

PICKS

None.

PANS

Cheese Ravioli. Why does a plate of eight raviolis look like two McDonald's Quarter Pounders to your blood vessels and belly? It's not just the ricotta cheese inside, but the cheeses that are melted on top. The toll: 810 calories and close to a day's bad fat (17 grams).

Ravioli di Portobello. Don't blame the portobello mushrooms for the 880 calories and 23 grams of bad fat. The culprit: the "creamy smoked cheese and sun-dried tomato sauce."

Manicotti Formaggio. "Ricotta, mozzarella, Parmesan cheese and herbs, baked in pasta rolls with marinara sauce" may end up as rolls closer to home, if you get our drift. And the cheeses—which pack 1½ days' worth of bad fat (28 grams)—will leave their mark inside your arteries.

Carne, Pollo, & Pesce (Meat, Chicken, & Fish)

PICKS

Venetian Apricot Chicken. Olive Garden promises just 450 calories in this Garden Fare dish of grilled chicken breast with apricot citrus sauce served with broccoli, asparagus, and diced tomatoes. We didn't analyze it, but the calories seem plausible. And there's no cheese to boost the saturated fat.

Shrimp Primavera. "Shrimp, bell peppers, onions, and mushrooms in a bold arrabbiata sauce over penne" translates into just 690 calories and 2 grams of sat fat.

Pork Filetino. It looks the same as it did in 2005, when our lab analysis showed just 340 calories, 3 grams of sat fat, and 420 mg of sodium. But those numbers only apply if you order your pork tenderloin with vegetables, not the Tuscan potatoes that normally come with the dish.

PANS

Shrimp & Asparagus Risotto. If the kitchen uses the recipe from the video of the Olive Garden chef that's on YouTube, butter is to blame for most of the 14 grams of bad fat.

Tuscan T-Bone. When a trimmed 18-oz. T-bone steak has fewer calories than nearly anything else on the menu, you know

you're in trouble. In 2005, when we analyzed this dish after trimming off most of the fat, it had just 580 calories. But you can only stay that low by substituting vegetables for the Tuscan potatoes that usually come with the steak. Of course, veggies don't counter the steak's 16 grams of bad fat (¾ of a day's worth).

Stuffed Chicken Marsala. It's stuffed with cheese (and sun-dried tomatoes), topped with creamy marsala sauce (and mushrooms), and served with Garlic Parmesan Mashed Potatoes. No wonder it has 21 grams of bad fat.



Here are the (dinner-size) dishes that we sent to an independent lab for analysis. (We analyzed the Pork Filetino and Tuscan T-Bone in 2005.) We didn't list items with high levels of trans fat (like fried calamari or dishes with Tuscan potatoes) because Olive Garden is switching to trans-free ingredients. Any trans in the dishes below is naturally occurring (and minimal). Our Picks (✓) are *relatively* low in calories and saturated fat, and most come with vegetables and protein. Dishes are ranked from least to most sat + trans fat, then calories.

	Calories	Saturated + Trans Fat (g)	Sodium (mg)
Cucina Classica			
✓ Linguine alla Marinara	790	2	1,040
✓ Capellini Pomodoro	990	2	1,900
Spaghetti & Meatballs	1,260	19	1,950
Five Cheese Ziti al Forno	1,190	26	1,910
Lasagna Classico	1,060	28	2,240
Fettuccine Alfredo	1,200	33	750
Pasta Ripiena			
Cheese Ravioli	810	17	1,580
Ravioli di Portobello	880	23	1,440
Manicotti Formaggio	910	28	1,890
Carne, Pollo, & Pesce			
✓ Venetian Apricot Chicken	450*	n/a	n/a
✓ Shrimp Primavera	690	2	n/a
✓ Pork Filetino with vegetables	340	3	420
Shrimp & Asparagus Risotto	620	14	2,190
Tuscan T-Bone with vegetables	580	16	1,010
Stuffed Chicken Marsala with Garlic Parmesan Mashed Potatoes	760	21	2,610

✓ Nutrition Action Pick. *Number from Olive Garden. n/a Number not available.

Daily Limits (for a 2,000-calorie diet): **Sat+Trans Fat:** 20 grams. **Sodium:** 1,500 milligrams.

Source: independent laboratory analyses. The use of information from this chart for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited without written permission from CSPJ.



Romano's Macaroni GRILL.

You have to give Macaroni Grill credit for:

- posting nutrition numbers for most menu items on its Web site (though, judging from their ingredients, some are probably wrong),
- frying only in (trans-free) soybean oil, and
- offering a “Create Your Own Pasta” that allows diners to mix and match sauce, pasta, vegetables, and (for a price) chicken or shrimp.

And you have to admire a chain that’s honest enough to post numbers that range from excessive to they’ve-gotta-be-kidding.

Here are some of the worst trouble spots (Pans) at Macaroni Grill’s 238 locations, plus a few items for the shrinking minority of Americans who aren’t overweight or obese (Picks).

Keep in mind that some of the chain’s numbers are calculated from recipes and some come from (more accurate) laboratory analyses. (Unfortunately, the Web site doesn’t say which are which.) Note: the numbers include dipping sauces (with the appetizers) and side dishes (with the entrées).

Antipasti (Appetizers)

Fortunately, most diners share an appetizer. But even a quarter of some of Macaroni Grill’s should be the *end* of your meal. Blood pressure alert: the loaf of Peasant Bread that the server plops down at your table is spiked with 2,140 milligrams of sodium.

PICKS

Side salad. It’s not on the appetizer menu, but it should be. A Caesar salad with 2 Tbs. of low-fat Caesar dressing has fewer calories (140) but more sodium (730 mg) than a Garden salad with 2 Tbs. of cider vinaigrette (270 calories and 490 mg of sodium). Kudos to Macaroni for coming up with a low-fat Caesar dressing.

PANS

Calamari Fritti. A 1,210-calorie platter of fried squid with dipping sauce that delivers 13 grams of bad fat and 4,170 mg of sodium is like having 10 KFC Crispy Chicken Strips. See if the folks at the next table want to take some off your hands.

Mozzarella Fritta. Each platter of breaded, fried cheese with dipping sauce has a day’s sodium and sat fat to divvy up among the arteries at your table.

Shrimp & Artichoke Dip. There’s enough Parmesan, mozzarella, half and half, and Parmesan bread crisps to supply more than a full day’s saturated fat. And with 3,350 mg of sodium in the bowl, nobody’s blood pressure will be dipping anytime soon.

Brick Oven Pizza. They may taste better than Pizza Hut’s Personal Pan pizzas, but they’re also larger, which means more calories (about 1,000 to 2,000 per pizza), sat fat (14 to 36 grams), and sodium (2,100 to 3,500 mg) to pass around the table.

Insalata (Entrée Salads)

Not all salads are created equal.

PICKS

Chicken Florentine. Spinach tossed with orzo (rice-shaped pasta), grilled chicken, pine nuts, black olives, capers, and Parmesan cheese has 490 calories and 3 grams of saturated fat. The sodium

is a question mark because Macaroni Grill’s number includes the salt in the water and chicken stock used to cook the orzo. (Some of the salt stays in the pot.) Get the dressing on the side.

Chicken Caesar. With low-fat Caesar dressing, the calories stay at 520 (good) and the sat fat at 8 grams (not bad for a restaurant entrée). But the sodium (890 mg in the salad plus 680 mg in the dressing) only looks good next to Macaroni Grill’s other salads.

PANS

Parmesan-Crusted Chicken. Greens are good, but not when you smother them with fried chicken, bacon, cheese, and Parmesan peppercorn ranch dressing. Who would expect 1,190 calories and 3,230 mg of sodium in a salad? And you can’t make it better (unless you ask for grilled chicken). Granted, the Seared Sea Scallops Salad reaches 1,320 calories. But you can ask for no Parmesan crisps, little or no feta cheese and prosciutto, and a dressing other than the so-called “light” citrus (270 calories). Warning: the Steak & Arugula Salad appears as a Sensible Fare item on the menu, though it’s anything but.

Pasta di Primi (Pasta Entrées)

Most get you ready for your primi coronary bypass.

PICKS

Create Your Own Pasta. We have no numbers, but you could do worse than add vegetables (like spinach, broccoli, asparagus, roasted red peppers, and diced tomatoes) and shrimp or chicken to pasta. Try the whole wheat penne (we couldn’t verify that it’s 100% whole grain). Top your creation with arrabiata or tomato basil sauce.

PANS

Pasta Milano, Penne or Vodka Rustica, Shrimp Portofino, Carmela’s Chicken Rigatoni. They’re coated with cheese, butter, or cream sauce and deliver 1,100 to 1,500 calories and one to two days’ saturated fat and sodium. The Penne Rustica, for example, bakes its pasta, shrimp, grilled chicken, and smoked prosciutto with cheese sauce under a crust of Parmesan cheese. That gives it slightly more calories and sat fat, and far more sodium, than a 16-oz. trimmed T-bone steak with a butter-topped baked potato and a Caesar side salad at a typical steak house.

Over-Stuffed Pasta

Overstuffed pasta, overstuffed diners.

PICKS

None.

PANS

Chicken Cannelloni. Macaroni Grill stuffs its cannelloni (and, eventually, your blood vessels) with chicken and cheese, tops it with tomato sauce, and bakes it in Asiago cream sauce. That accounts for the nearly two days’ worth of sat fat (36 grams) and sodium (3,050 mg). Congratulations. You’ve just eaten the calories and sodium of 8 (and the sat fat of 18) KFC Original Recipe Drumsticks.

Lobster Ravioli. “Decadent lobster-filled tarragon pasta topped with sautéed shrimp, asparagus, tomatoes and lemon butter sauce.” You’d get the same 1,090 calories and 54 grams of sat fat



by dipping a 1½-pound lobster into a stick of melted butter.

Amore de la Grill (Grilled Entrées)

Our two Picks deserve the Sensible Fare symbol you'll see next to them on the menu.

PICKS

Pollo Magro "Skinny Chicken." "Grilled chicken breast with honey balsamic glaze served with grilled tender-crisp asparagus and broccoli" will cost you just 330 calories and 1 gram of saturated fat. And the taste is anything but "skinny."

Simple Salmon. Grilled salmon with asparagus and broccoli. It's not quite as skinny as the pollo, but a 590-calorie, veggie-rich dish with 6 grams of sat fat—most of it from the heart-healthy salmon—isn't easy to find in restaurants.

PANS

Tuscan Rib-Eye. This 16-oz. hunk of meat served with garlic mashed potatoes and grilled asparagus sends 1,000 calories and a day's sat fat (23 grams) toward that bulge where your waist used to be. Macaroni Grill keeps the numbers (on your steak, bathroom scale, and cholesterol test) high by melting butter on top. *Grazie!*

Grilled Pork Chops. How on earth do they squeeze nearly 2,000 calories and 44 grams of saturated fat into a plate of pork chops with wild mushroom risotto and broccoli? The risotto is partly to blame. It's typically made with butter and cheese (and salty chicken broth). But that's not enough to explain why the dish is equal to five McDonald's Quarter Pounders.

Classico Italian

Every item in the Classico Italian section is as bad as or worse than the 1,000-calorie, entire-day's-bad-fat Tuscan Rib-Eye steak dinner from the Amore de la Grill.

PICKS

None.

PANS

Eggplant or Veal Parmesan. By the time either one is breaded, sautéed, baked with cheese, and served with marinara-topped capellini pasta, you can count on some 1,250 calories and 40 grams of saturated fat. And to kick your blood pressure up a notch, each delivers around 2,600 mg of sodium.

Chicken & Shrimp Scalloppine. In the wrong hands, "sautéed chicken and shrimp with mushrooms, artichokes, capers, and smoked Prosciutto in a lemon butter sauce" can end up with 1,380 calories, 36 grams of sat fat, and 3,410 mg of sodium. (Even without the shrimp, it's a Pan.)

Fettuccine Alfredo. The dish we once called "a heart attack on a plate" lives up to its reputation. Butter, cream, and Parmesan cheese help squeeze more than 2½ days' worth of sat fat (53 grams) into a 1,130-calorie dish.

Spaghetti & Meatballs. Spaghetti with meat sauce is just your average 1,100-calorie platter of white flour, fatty meat, and salt-laden sauce that delivers 35 grams of sat fat. But spaghetti with meat sauce *and* meatballs is in a class of its own.

It's not often you find a 2,430-calorie dish loaded with close to 3 days' worth of saturated fat (57 grams) and more than

2 teaspoons of salt (5,290 mg of sodium). It's got more calories and sat fat than *two* Macaroni Grill Tuscan Rib-Eye steak dinners.

Desserts

With only 1,000 to 2,000 calories already under your belt (literally), you're probably still hungry. How about another 1,000 to 1,600 to tide you over until you can get home for a snack?

PICKS

Italian Sorbetto. It's the only dessert even worth considering. Macaroni Grill doesn't provide any numbers, but its 6-oz. serving of sorbet probably delivers no saturated fat and around 150 calories. (We can't tell you what's in the Almond Biscotti that comes with it, though.) At least the chefs resisted the temptation to smother the sorbet in chocolate, whipped cream, or caramel sauce.

PANS

Smothered Chocolate Cake. Chocolate cake can be so dull. So Macaroni Grill zips it up with chocolate ganache and pecans. Surely you have room for a post-dinner 1,180 calories and 30 grams of saturated fat. Fat cells filled? You'll make some more. Don't want chocolate? The Lemon Passion will do about the same damage.

Tiramisu. "Ladyfingers dipped in espresso liqueur, then layered between rich mascarpone cream." Sodium aside, it's like ordering a plate of Spaghetti & Meat Sauce for dessert.

Dessert Ravioli. What happens when you stuff crumbled peanuts, caramel, and chocolate ganache into "golden-fried" pastries and cover them with vanilla ice cream and caramel sauce? It's like polishing off your meal with a typical dinner-house platter of BBQ baby back ribs with french fries and cole slaw.

New York Cheesecake. A tasty source of 980 calories and two days' worth of saturated fat (41 grams). And that's without the caramel fudge sauce. It's like eating two orders of Italian Sorbetto, each one topped with 8 pats of butter.

Italian Tips

Here's how to survive a visit to your favorite Italian restaurant with minimal damage to your waistline, arteries, and blood pressure.

- Split an entrée, take home half, or order a lunch-size portion.
- Pick a pasta (whole wheat, if available) with tomato sauce or —if you can afford the calories— an olive oil sauce. Stay away from creamy sauces like Alfredo and vodka.
- Order dishes built around vegetables, seafood, or grilled chicken that don't come with cheese or cream sauce.
- Fill up on salad, but hold the cheese and get the dressing on the side (so you can use only what you need).
- If you want some cheese, sprinkle a little Parmesan on top of your entrée, soup, or salad. A tablespoon has just 1 gram of saturated fat, 20 calories, and 80 mg of sodium.
- Make your side dish vegetables rather than pasta or potatoes.
- Limit the (often) unlimited supply of bread.



The company says that none of its ingredients contain trans fat. So other than the (small amount of) trans that occurs naturally in the meat, cheese, butter, and cream, the bad fat at Macaroni Grill is all saturated.

For some dishes we listed sodium as “not available” because the numbers on the chain’s Web site seem implausible. Our Picks (✓) are *relatively* low in calories and saturated fat, and most come with vegetables and protein. Dishes are ranked from least to most sat + trans fat, then calories.

	Calories	Saturated + Trans Fat (g)	Sodium (mg)
Antipasti (1 order)			
Peasant Bread (1 loaf)	520	0	2,140
Calamari Fritti with basil pesto aioli and zesty pizzaiola (4 Tbs. each)	1,210	13	4,170
Tomato Bruschetta	1,000	11	1,810
Mozzarella Fritta with basil pesto aioli and zesty pizzaiola (4 Tbs. each)	880	18	1,770
BBQ Chicken Pizza	970	14	2,700
Margherita Pizza	1,010	18	2,070
Romano’s Sampler (Tomato Bruschetta, Mozzarella Fritta, Calamari) with zesty pizzaiola (4 Tbs.)	1,580	22	3,620
	1,640	22	4,000
Shrimp & Artichoke Dip with Parmesan bread crisps	980	24	3,350
Pesto Chicken Pizza	1,940	34	3,000
Sicilian Pizza	1,450	36	3,520
Signature Soups			
Chicken Toscana (cup)	260	8	1,640
Chicken Toscana (bowl)	510	15	3,240
Insalata (side salads with 2 Tbs. dressing; other salads with 4 Tbs.)			
Caesar (side salad)	110	2	390
✓ with low-fat Caesar	140	2	730
with Caesar	260	4	650
Garden (side salad)	130	2	460
with fat-free Italian	160	2	900
with creamy Italian	240	3	900
✓ with cider vinaigrette	270	4	490
Chicken Florentine	490	3	n/a
✓ with garlic lemon vinaigrette	830	9	n/a
Mozzarella alla Caprese (3) with balsamic vinaigrette	260	7	410
Chicken Caesar	460	8	890
✓ with low-fat Caesar	520	8	1,570
with Caesar	920	16	1,660
Insalata Blu	440	12	970
with balsamic vinaigrette	640	14	1,590
Mozzarella alla Caprese (5) with balsamic vinaigrette	450	12	760

	Calories	Saturated + Trans Fat (g)	Sodium (mg)
Steak & Arugula Salad with Toscana	570	13	2,530
	890	18	3,290
Parmesan-Crusted Chicken with Parmesan peppercorn ranch	1,060	15	2,880
	1,190	17	3,230
Seared Sea Scallops with light citrus	1,050	22	2,810
	1,320	25	2,860

Pasta di Primi

Pasta Milano	1,130	22	2,120
Vodka Rustica	1,170	24	2,660
Shrimp Portofino	1,130	29	1,880
Carmela’s Chicken Rigatoni	1,320	34	1,550
Penne Rustica	1,540	39	3,370

Over-Staffed Pasta

Chicken Cannelloni	1,080	36	3,050
Lobster Ravioli	1,090	54	1,910

Amore de la Grill

✓ Pollo Magro “Skinny Chicken” with asparagus and broccoli	330	1	770
✓ Simple Salmon with asparagus and broccoli	590	6	1,390
Grilled Salmon with spinach orzo pasta	1,230	9	n/a
Chicken Sorrentino with capellini	1,050	10	1,660
Chicken Portobello with spinach orzo pasta	1,020	11	n/a
Grilled Halibut with pesto Parmesan risotto	830	12	1,440
Tuscan Rib-Eye with garlic mashed potatoes and asparagus	690	20	n/a
	1,000	23	n/a
Grilled Pork Chops with wild mushroom risotto and broccoli	1,940	44	n/a

Classico Italian

Chicken Marsala with capellini	1,090	23	2,060
Chicken Scaloppine with capellini	1,110	30	2,870
Spaghetti & Meat Sauce	1,110	35	2,380
Eggplant Parmesan with capellini	1,240	36	2,560
Veal Marsala with capellini	1,320	36	3,160
Chicken & Shrimp Scaloppine with capellini	1,380	36	3,410
Spaghetti & Meatballs with tomato sauce	1,430	41	4,540
Veal Parmesan with capellini	1,270	44	2,660
Fettuccine Alfredo	1,130	53	1,200
with chicken or shrimp ¹	1,350	56	1,320
Spaghetti & Meatballs with meat sauce	2,430	57	5,290

Desserts

Lemon Passion	1,150	29	910
Smothered Chocolate Cake	1,180	30	930
Dessert Ravioli	1,630	33	1,150
Tiramisu	1,000	36	160
New York Cheesecake, plain	980	41	620

✓ Nutrition Action Pick. ¹ Average. n/a Number not available.

Daily Limits (for a 2,000-calorie diet): **Sat+Trans Fat:** 20 grams. **Sodium:** 1,500 milligrams.

Source: company information. The use of information from this chart for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited without written permission from CSPI.