

Industry reacts to healthier food requests from customers

By **JAKE LONG**

People are eating and drinking lighter these days. And the business world has taken notice.

From natural food stores to restaurants and to the beverage industry, there's a trend of customers seeking healthier food options.

Dr. Sue Hamby of Temple, Discover Natural Foods Inc. president, said people realize there are problems with obesity, along with many health problems. Some customers with high cholesterol visit the store hoping to find healthier alternatives.

"And I think I've seen that as an increase that people are becoming more health conscious," Dr. Hamby said. "I've had this store 17 years, and I can see a real trend. And they're realizing that it's not just food selections, it's a whole lifestyle change."

Las Casas Restaurante has seen the trend of low carb diets become a big hit at its location, said Ralph Sheffield, owner.

He said there has been a lot of restaurants that have put their own low carb menus in because of the Atkins and South Beach diets.

Las Casas Restaurante went to a low carb menu in December or January, he said. The menu been slowly and gradually building within the last year with restaurants looking to offer healthier choices in regards to customers' diets, Sheffield said.

"Just like any new menu item, you try to cater to your guests or new potential customers," Sheffield said, "and since there was a big craze for the low carb diet, quite naturally that was a big fit."

El Chico in Temple has included a low carb menu for about two months, said Michael Navarro, El Chico kitchen manager in Temple. He said about 20 percent of the menu is low carb.

"A lot of people are glad that we're starting to do that," he said.

At the rate that the low carb menu is going, it might be a permanent menu feature, Navarro said. Right now it's an insert to the printed menu, he said.

Some customers are thirsting for a healthy alternative.

For example, Fuze is distributed around the United States. However, locally, it is distributed by Temple Bottling Company.

The trend in the United States is shifting away from items that contain high fructose corn syrup and aspartame, according to Danny Sky-Eagle, Fuze Beverage Company regional manager. He explained the consumer base is looking for a healthy alternative to soft drinks and aspartame containing diet drinks.

There's been tremendous response to the low carb menu at Las Casas Restaurante, Sheffield said. He said about 10-15 percent of the lunch guests order from the low carb menu. And in the evening, there are at least 5 percent to order low carb menu wise.

"That's pretty good percentage for just a few selected menu items," Sheffield said.

If Las Casas Restaurante had not gone to the low carb menu, Sheffield suspects that would not have had any kind of dollar effect.

"I think what it does do though is it brings awareness to something else that we do offer," Sheffield said. "I think it builds a better relationship with our customers because we're offering it now."

This probably means the customer comes back on a more regular basis, Sheffield said, by frequenting the restaurant a little more than maybe they would have in the past.

Knowing that they're on this particular diet and that we have items that meet that need helps, Sheffield said.

As the consumer becomes more aware of their health and becomes more health conscious, "you're going to see more of these trends develop in restaurants, I believe," Sheffield said.



MICHAEL NAVARRO, kitchen manager of El Chico on 31st Street, says a low-carb menu has become increasingly popular at the restaurant. (Photo by Dana Centola)