

Heartaches by the number

By **Pia de Jong** - November 1, 2016

Illustration by Eliane Gerrits

‘Mom! “says my daughter as she studies the menu at our New York City restaurant. “The food here is absurdly expensive. It’s \$1,030 for scalloped potatoes!’”

“Expensive?” I ask. “Isn’t this prix fixe?”

Ah, but then I see what she means. Printed next to the name of every dish is a small, damning number. But it’s not for dollars; it’s for calories. The grim accounting of the price your health pays for a meal here.

The American government has long been trying to require restaurants and national fast-food chains of 12 or more outlets to list the number of calories in food. New York City and California have passed their own laws. But other places in the “fly-over” between the two coasts, including here in New Jersey, this is not so simple, especially for the pizza parlors and taco trucks that roam our streets. They fight it out tooth and claw — not surprisingly, if you know that a single slice of Sbarro’s stuffed sausage and pepperoni pizza rings up 810 calories and Louisiana chicken pasta at the Cheesecake Factory turns the calculator into a smoking wreck at about 2,370 calories.

In the Netherlands, where I am from, I often stop by the local bakery to fetch something sweet along with my coffee. I always stand mesmerized in front of the seductive array of freshly baked goods behind the counter and inevitably succumb to my default option: a warm

almond croissant. But here my sinful little pleasure has been taken away. Not only does the American almond croissant look less appetizing, the stark numbers shout J'accuse! Each croissant, muffin, or bagel with cream cheese easily clears the bar of 400 calories. Take a big bite and you have enough fat and sugar for half a meal churning away inside.

Meanwhile, some restaurants appear to compete to stuff as many calories into a dish or drink as they possibly can. For example, the popular chain Sonic weaponizes a peanut butter caramel pie milkshake into an artery-clogging detonation of 2,090 calories, enough to send a grown man reeling to bed for an entire day. Yet this witch's brew is the favorite drink of a classmate of my daughter. Almost daily we see her walk by, bored, sucking on this oleaginous confection with a straw. This is Russian roulette by diet. Does she realize the risks?

It's not a bad idea to confuse the number of calories with the price, as my daughter did. Because where should you really run the numbers? In your wallet or in your health? The price of all those unnecessary carbohydrates, fats, sugars, and salt is high, much higher than the financial accounting. My daughter's classmate is already diagnosed as pre-diabetic.

The 2,000 calories that we need every day never comes without a price. You can easily buy all those calories for one dollar of white rice, peanut butter, and granulated sugar. Nutritional value: low to zero. Perhaps in the future we need for each visit to a restaurant, coffee shop or grocery store a printout of all of the above: listing the price, calories, salt, fat, and sugar And a calorie counter embedded in our credit card.

“I will never eat scalloped potatoes again,” says my daughter with a sniff, as she glances at the menu. She looks sad; this was her favorite dish. “The vegetable dish is 210 calories,” she says. “And the tomato soup is just 155.”

But she does not feel like eating a vegetable dish or tomato soup. We had something to celebrate, but the accusing menu took all the fun away. Even I feel a little ill at ease.

“Come on,” I say, “you know what, let’s go somewhere else.” The last thing I want is a 16-year-old with an eating disorder. But once we are outside, we don’t feel like eating any more. Our appetite vanished in the chilly autumn wind.

Pia de Jong

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. Her bestselling memoir, “Charlotte,” was published in January in Amsterdam. She can be contacted at piadejong.com.