MENU SANO
Nutrition Tech

Toronto Public Health's Savvy Diner Program

Toronto Public Health's Savvy Diner program and MenuSano played an important role in the Ontario Government's Healthy Menu Choices Act.

TORONTO
Public Health

Increases in the consumption of meals outside of the home have prompted growing interest in menu labelling. Menu labelling is the practice of providing information on calories, fat, sodium, and other selected nutrients in menu items at points of purchase, as a strategy to reduce obesity and diet-related chronic disease.

Menu labelling is an intervention that addresses some of the challenges consumers face in making healthy choices in the restaurant environment. It has been recommended by many experts, health organizations and health advocates including:

- The Institute of Medicine
- The Ontario Medical Association
- Cancer Care Ontario, Public Health Ontario
- Health Canada's Sodium Reduction Working Group
- Ontario's Healthy Kids Panel
- Centre for Science in the Public Interest
- Fitness Industry Council of Canada

Toronto Public Health (TPH) has been a strong voice in promoting legislation to make menu labelling a requirement for larger chain restaurants. When the Ontario provincial government announced its commitment to introduce menu labelling legislation in 2013 for chain restaurants, TPH was highly supportive and provided studies and recommendations for implementation.

A major contribution came from Toronto's Savvy Diner pilot campaign. From 2013 to 2018, Toronto Public Health initiated the pilot to explore the feasibility of voluntary menu labelling in Toronto with the provision of TPH support. The pilot recruited independently owned/operated restaurants to analyze their menus and provide voluntary calorie and sodium values for all standard menu items on their menus or menu boards.

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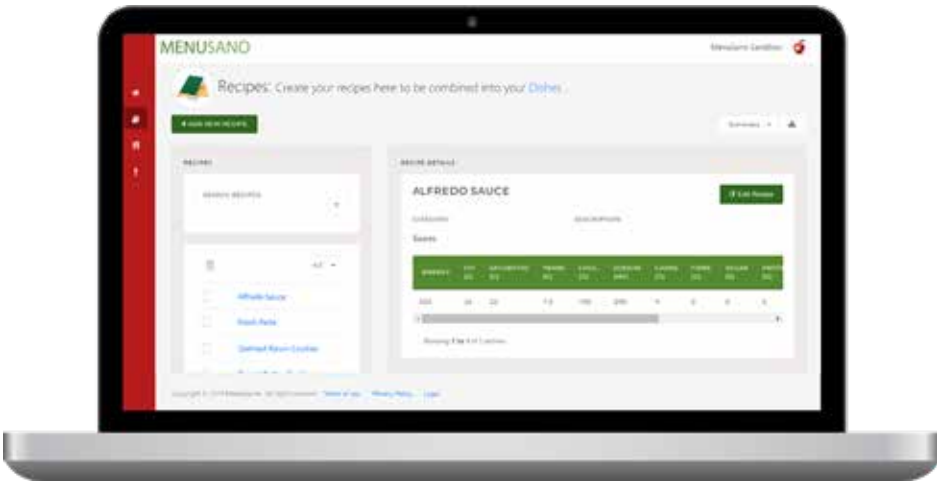
The Savvy Diner project team was made up of 12 people, including 10 dietitians. The program ran with 15 restaurants.

> ***"I did want to [do] menu labelling … even before we got approached by Toronto Public Health. Students were asking for it. We pride ourselves in providing nutritious, healthy and fresh food to students."***
>
> ***- Restaurant Operator***

Nutrition Analysis Component

Conducting a nutrition analysis of each restaurant's full menu was a key program component. Traditionally, nutrition analysis of food items would be done by a lab, which costs up to $1500 per menu item with a 2 - 5 week turnaround time. These costs would not make the pilot feasible, nor sustainable by restaurants beyond the pilot.

The Savvy Diner program selected MenuSano as their nutrition analysis tool. With MenuSano, the need for costly lab or nutritionist analysis was removed. Restaurant operators/staff and Toronto Public Health's dieticians were able to enter their restaurant's recipes and menu items to obtain the calorie and sodium content. MenuSano worked closely with TPH's dieticians to ensure its nutritional calculations were accurate and that it met program requirements.



Toronto Public Health used MenuSano, an online nutrition analysisi tool for the Savvy Diner program.

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Savvy Diner marketing material aimed towards consumers.

The Result

The Savvy Diner pilot campaign while concluding that not enough restaurants were interested to warrant a full-scale implementation, did have positive results. TPH reports they were able to successfully raise awareness about the actual healthfulness of their menus. Some operators even made changes to their recipes to reduce calorie and sodium levels.

> ***"They seem a bit overwhelmed at the results as the calories and sodium values of some of their combos are high…. They reformulated all their menu items to reduce the sodium. They're happy with the results now."***
>
> ***- TPH Dietitian***

- From a consumer's perspective, the results were also positive:
- 75% saw the calorie and sodium information in the restaurant
- 84% liked the calorie and sodium information that was provided at the restaurant
- 79% would tell others that the restaurant provides this information

When the implementation phase was complete, with calories and sodium levels posted on the menus, the Savvy Diner campaign continued to educate consumers through traditional and online campaigns about eating healthier in restaurants. Today, TPH continues to support restaurants to create healthier options.

Toronto Public Health played an important role in informing Ontario's Healthy Menu Choices Act, 2015. This act requires restaurant chains with 20 or more locations to provide their customers with specific calorie information for most food and drink to be consumed or taken away.

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