

Healthier catering tips for Italian restaurants and takeaways

Guidance for Italian restaurants and takeaways on providing and promoting healthier food and drink.

Healthier eating is becoming more and more important to customers. Here are some practical catering suggestions to help support your customers with a healthier lifestyle.

You may already be achieving several of these tips but be prepared to go further and make real changes to help your customers make healthier choices.

Portion size

Eating too many calories can lead to obesity, which in turn increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers. Even small reductions at each meal can make a real difference.

- **Consider reducing portion sizes** across your menu to a level that is acceptable to customers. For example, consider gradually reducing your pizza width – you will use less dough and fewer toppings. If customers are tending to leave food on their plates, this is a clear signal that portion sizes are too large and a smaller size would be acceptable. This could also help reduce the costs of removing waste.
- Give customers who want smaller portions a choice, in addition to your standard portions **try offering smaller or half portions**. For example, try half portions of pizza or pasta with a side salad.

Fats and frying

High-fat foods contain lots of calories which can lead to weight gain. This in turn can lead to type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers. Reducing saturated fat intake can lower blood cholesterol and reduce the risk of heart disease.

- **Try using less cream** in main course sauces and in desserts or swap to half-fat crème fraîche, single cream or low fat plain yogurt instead.
- A little butter or olive oil tastes great, but it is high in calories so **use very sparingly**;
 - each tablespoon of butter adds around 102 calories
 - each tablespoon of olive oil adds around 100 calories
 - each tablespoon of double cream adds around 74 calories
 - each tablespoon of single cream adds around 29 calories
 - each tablespoon of half-fat crème fraîche adds around 25 calories
- **Try using less cheese** in dishes or swap to an appropriate reduced-fat hard cheese or a cheese naturally lower in fat, like mozzarella.
- For salads, serve the dressing on the side to limit the default amount of dressing offered to customers.
- **Swap chilli oil for flakes or fresh chilli.**
- If you make your own garlic bread, try using a little less butter or brush with olive oil instead.

Salt

It is important to reduce salt intake as too much salt can lead to high blood pressure and an increased risk of stroke and heart disease.

- **Reduce the amount of salt** and salty ingredients in your dishes over time by using less salt and salty stock to all your dishes including starters, soups, sauces, meats, risotto and avoid adding salt to pasta water. Rock salt and sea salt are no healthier than regular table salt so make sure you use sparingly.
- If you make your own pizza dough and tomato sauce, gradually **cut down the amount of salt you use**. Customers won't notice if you do this gradually. Try adding a little less salt each week until you can avoid using it altogether.
- In addition to your standard pizzas, **try promoting new combinations that offer less salty meat and cheese and more vegetables** - like a 'Hot pepperoni' made with rocket leaves, red pepper, chilli and less pepperoni or cheese.
- **Consider removing salt from tables** and counters and provide it to customers only on request. Many businesses are already doing this. People sometimes add salt out of habit without thinking or tasting the food.

Sugar

Eating too many foods and drinks high in sugar can contribute to excess calories and lead to weight gain, which in turn increases the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke and some cancers. It is also linked to tooth decay.

- **Offer healthier drinks as the default option** such as water, lower fat milks, low calorie or no added sugar drinks, or pure fruit juices (in a 150ml serving size or as close to this volume as possible), rather than sugary drinks. Display these at eye level where appropriate.
- Where desserts are available, offer those lower in fat and sugar and/or smaller portion sizes or replace with fruit options such as fresh fruit without sugar or syrup. You can also offer desserts that meet [Public Health England's sugar reduction and calorie or portion size guidelines](#).

Fruit vegetables and fibre

These are low in calories and good sources of vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre. Eating plenty of them will help to promote digestive health and can help prevent heart disease, stroke and some cancers.

- Look across your menu and think about where you could **add more vegetable and/or pulses** to as many dishes as possible (while not adding more fat, sugar or salt). This will allow you to use less of other ingredients (like pasta or cheese) and the plate will still look full.
- **Offer wholewheat pasta** as an option on your menu. You could offer it as an alternative to standard pasta or freshly cooked dishes or have at least one specific wholewheat pasta dish.
- **Offer fruit salad or a platter of fruit** on your dessert menu or fruits like melon or figs as part of a starter. The fruit can be fresh, canned in fruit juice, dried or frozen.
- Make sure each main meat or fish dish includes at least one portion (80g) of vegetables.

Promote healthier options

Although it is important to improve the nutrient content of all menu items, you can additionally develop promotions to give a unique selling point and encourage customers to pick a healthier meal or snack to eat.

- Make sure special promotions, meal deals, set menus, specials boards, menu inserts and children's menus **all include healthier options with less salt, saturated fat, sugar and calories**. For example:
 - starters: soup or salad
 - mains: tomato-based pasta dishes rather than creamy sauces, grilled fish with vegetables instead of fried options, or pizzas with vegetable toppings rather than salty meats
 - desserts: where desserts are available, offer those lower in fat and sugar and/or smaller portion sizes, or replace with fruit options, for example, fruit with low fat plain yogurt. Choose desserts that meet the sugar reduction and calorie or portion size guidelines.
- Try to include healthier drinks, fruit and vegetable options in all deals and promotions.
- When a customer asks for a recommendation, train staff to suggest and promote healthier options with more fibre and less salt, saturated fat, sugar and calories.

Source healthier ingredients and food products from suppliers

[Check the nutrition information](#) about the foods and drinks you buy in and choose options with higher fibre and less salt, sugar and fats. Your supplier may be able to assist you.

Provide energy information

[Calorie Wise](#) is a free scheme in Northern Ireland to help catering businesses display calorie information on menus. This allows customers to have the information they need to make healthier choices when eating out.

The Food Standards Agency provides a free, online tool called [MenuCal](#) which helps businesses to calculate the energy value of food, in both kilojoules and kilocalories. The MenuCal tool also assists businesses to manage allergen information.