

Salud America!

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

RESEARCH BRIEF

December 2011

Salud Tiene Sabor: Creating Healthy Eating Environments for Latino Families

Introduction

Local food environments influence whether or not children and families can eat a healthy diet.^{1,2,3} In many low-income Latino communities, the preponderance of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores combined with a lack of supermarkets means residents have few places to buy healthy foods.^{4,5} South Los Angeles, where 37 percent of Latino children are overweight,⁶ fits this description. These conditions prompted community residents, with help from the Healthy Eating Active Communities (HEAC) program and the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, to successfully advocate for a moratorium on the construction of new fast-food restaurants in the community.^{7,8}

Including healthy options on menus, and providing customers with nutrition information, are two other promising ways to increase access to and consumption of healthy foods.⁹ As of January 2011, California law requires menu labeling in chain restaurants, and federal law requires similar menu labeling. However, neither of these policies addresses small independent restaurants such as ethnic restaurants in low-income communities. In California, such restaurants are pioneering the voluntary

AUTHORS

Carmen Rita Nevarez, M.D., M.P.H.

Public Health Institute

Sarah Samuels, Dr.P.H., Liz Schwarte, M.P.H.
and Mariah Laffleur, M.P.H.

Samuels & Associates

Beth Weinstein

Esperanza Community Housing Corporation

Pri De Silva, M.S.W.

Formerly with Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

PEER REVIEW

Peer review for this research brief was conducted by *Salud America!* National Advisory Committee Member Mary Story, Ph.D., R.D., professor in the Division of Epidemiology and Community Health at the University of Minnesota and director of Healthy Eating Research, an RWJF national program.

For more information about *Salud America!*, visit

www.salud-america.org

¹ The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. *Restaurant Realities: Inequalities in Access to Healthy Restaurant Choices. A Research Brief*. Princeton: The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008.

² Richter KP, Harris KJ, Paine-Andrews A, et al. "Measuring the Health Environment for Physical Activity and Nutrition Among Youth: A Review of the Literature and Applications for Community Initiatives." *Prev Med*, 31(2):S98-S111, 2000.

³ Samuels SE, Craypo L, Boyle M, et al. "The California Endowment's Healthy Eating Active Communities (HEAC) Program: A Midpoint Review." *Am J of Public Health*, 100: 2114-2123, 2010.

⁴ Larson NI, Story MT, and Nelson MC. "Neighborhood Environments: Disparities in Access to Healthy Foods in the U.S." *Am J Prev Med*, 36(1): 74-81, 2009.

⁵ Shaffer, A. "The persistence of LA's grocery gap: the need for a new food policy and approach for market development" Center for Food and Justice.

<http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/cfj/publications/Supermarket%20Report%20November%202002.pdf>.

⁶ Madsen KA, Weedn AE, Crawford PB. "Disparities in Peaks, Plateaus, and Declines in Prevalence of High BMI Among Adolescents." *Pediatrics*, 126(3): 434-42, 2010.

⁷ Severson K. "Los Angeles Stages A Fast Food Revolution."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/13/dining/13calo.html> (accessed January 2010).

⁸ Samuels SE, et al., 2114-2123.

⁹ Flores G, Sanchez-Vaznaugh L, Goldman-Rosas L, et al. "Latino Children's Health and the Environment." In: Pérez-Escamilla R and Melgar-Quinones H (Eds.) *Latino Children's Wellness*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 2011 (In Press).



adoption of menu labeling in Latino communities.^{10,11} These changes are desperately needed in communities burdened by lack of access to healthy foods and high rates of childhood obesity.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH RESULTS

Our *Salud America!* pilot research project, “Evaluation of the Impact of a Menu-Labeling Program (Smart Menu/*La Salud Tiene Sabor*) in South Los Angeles,” is evaluating the *Salud Tiene Sabor* program. *Salud Tiene Sabor*, the first program of its kind in California, supports healthy food choices in restaurants by providing access to healthy menu items and nutrition information, including calories posted on menu boards. In collaboration with Esperanza Community Housing Corporation and the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, seven independent restaurants have implemented the *Sabor* program at *Mercado La Paloma*, a community marketplace with restaurants, shops, social services and cultural events in South Los Angeles that serves primarily Latino residents. A registered dietician analyzed all restaurants’ recipes for nutrition content and provided guidance on how to make menu items healthier. The restaurants—which serve a range of cuisines, including Mexican, Peruvian and Thai—have calories posted on colorful menu boards and offer other detailed nutritional information at the register including grams of fat, saturated fat and sugar. *Promotoras* (community health promoters) at a health booth at the *Mercado* have promoted the healthier options to families who eat there.

Our evaluation team is assessing the impact the *Sabor* program is having on consumers’ purchase intentions, vendor practices and sales, replication by other venues, and the effect the California menu labeling law has on these independent restaurants. The mixed-methods participatory evaluation includes environmental and patron awareness assessments, vendor interviews, stakeholder surveys, secondary data and media analyses and a sales tracking analysis. Preliminary evaluation results show that *Sabor* has positively impacted what patrons intend to buy, that healthy eating options are available at the *Mercado*, and that restaurant owners support the changes made through the program. For instance:

- **Customers are aware of and use nutrition information on menu boards.**

According to our patron assessment, conducted by *promotoras* in English and Spanish with 60 adult *Mercado* patrons, 65 percent of patrons saw calorie information on the menu boards when ordering. Of these, nearly half said the calorie information influenced their purchase choices that day. About 67 percent of patrons strongly agreed that consumers have the right to know the nutritional content of restaurant meals, and roughly 93 percent said they would like to see nutrition information when ordering at restaurants. Eighty percent of the patrons

¹⁰ Hanni KD, Garcia E, Elleberg C, et al. “Steps to a Healthier Salinas: Targeting the Taqueria: Implementing Healthy Food Options at Mexican American Restaurants.” *Health Promot Pract*, 10:91-99S, 2009.

¹¹ The California Endowment. *South Los Angeles Neighborhood Mercado Pioneers Smart Menu Labeling Among Non-Chain Restaurants*. Los Angeles: The California Endowment, 2010.

surveyed reside in zip codes within five miles of the Mercado and nearly 50 percent eat out at restaurants at least three times per week. These findings are consistent with a similar evaluation of a menu labeling effort in Tacoma-Pierce County, Wash., which found that 71 percent of patrons noticed nutritional information and more than half of them chose a healthier option as a result.¹²

- **Restaurant owners support the *Salud Tiene Sabor* program.** Restaurant owners report embracing changes made through *Sabor*, according to English and Spanish surveys. Although restaurants were not required to change menu items, six of the seven vendors surveyed did so voluntarily. For instance, restaurants have begun using healthier cooking methods, offering whole beans instead of refried beans, using more vegetables and reducing the sugar in beverages. Some restaurant owners have changed their own eating habits, and others promote healthy eating choices to their customers. Most said they would recommend these changes to other small, independent restaurant owners. Furthermore, five vendors reported no notable change in costs and profits. While three observed that fruits and vegetables are more expensive than other ingredients, two reported increased profits due to smaller portion sizes.

- **Healthy eating options are available to *Mercado la Paloma* customers.** Environmental assessments revealed restaurants' food and beverage cost, calories and other nutrition info. Foods were analyzed using the Institute of Medicine high school food and beverage standards¹³ and Los Angeles Worksite food standards,¹⁴ which recommend entrees be no more than 400 calories per serving, and side dishes, snacks or appetizers be no more than 200 calories per serving. Nearly half of entrees and side dishes in the restaurants met these recommendations (see Table 1). Entrees averaged 455 calories and side dishes averaged 279 calories.

¹² Pulos E, Leng K. "Evaluation of a Voluntary Menu Labeling Program in Full-Service Restaurants." *Am J of Public Health*, 100: 1035-1039, 2010.

¹³ Committee on Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools. *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools: Leading the Way Toward Healthier Youth*. V. A. Stallings and A. L. Yaktine. Washington, D.C., Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. 2007.

¹⁴ Los Angeles County Food Policy: Vending Machines, Fundraising, and County Sponsored Meetings: Recommendations from the Los Angeles County Physical Activity and Nutrition Taskforce (PANTF). 2009. http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/nut/Los%20Angeles%20County%20Food%20Policy_Dec09.pdf (Accessed April 2010)

Table 1

Analysis of Calorie Content of Foods Sold at *Mercado La Paloma*

Item Category	Calorie Target*	# Analyzed	Calorie Range	Avg. Calories	% Below Target Threshold (# Items)	% Over Target Threshold (# Items)
Beverages	n/a	96	5 - 780	241	n/a	n/a
Entrees	≤ 400 cal	347	110 - 1490	455	42% (147)	58% (200)
Side Dishes/ Appetizers	≤ 200 cal	114	20 - 760	279	41% (47)	59% (67)
Dessert	n/a	64	20 - 570	175	n/a	n/a

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Early findings from our evaluation of *Salud Tiene Sabor* show that small, independently owned restaurants in low-income Latino communities can help improve local nutrition environments. They also show that Latino communities are aware of and positively influenced by menu labeling. This is particularly relevant given the new federal menu labeling law that is similar to California's. Because the federal law applies only to chains with twenty or more locations, the *Sabor* program establishes a model for restaurants that wish to make nutrition information accessible but are not covered by the statute. A *taqueria* and a corner store in South Los Angeles have initiated their own menu labeling programs modeled on *Sabor*. These experiences may encourage other independently-owned restaurants in Los Angeles and nationwide to follow this model. The evaluation has the potential to inform and advance policy action that would incentivize independently-owned restaurants to offer nutrition information and provide healthy foods in low-income communities whose residents are at high risk for obesity. Further research is needed to build the evidence for how such interventions may help prevent obesity among Latino children.