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

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5. Shaffer, A. “The persistence if LA’s grocery gap: the need for a new food policy and approach for market development” Center for Food and Justice.
7. Severson K. “Los Angeles Stages A Fast Food Revolution.”

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For more information about Salud America!, visit www.salud-america.org
adoption of menu labeling in Latino communities. 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

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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.  

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.

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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.

### Table 1

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