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Au Bon Pain crunches the numbers, comes up with lunch

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I HAVE MET the future and eaten several servings of it.

Delicious.

Jewel-green asparagus sprinkled with almonds. A tuna-stuffed tomato topped with a dollop of Mediterranean-inspired tapenade. Smoked turkey wrapped around cranberry chutney and gorgonzola. Gorgonzola! Who's ballsy enough to offer a stinky cheese like that to the workers of the world at lunchtime?

Apparently, Au Bon Pain. The 226-chain "fast-casual" restaurant found in airports, hospitals, college towns and office complexes started offering small portions of these tasty dishes just this month. Served in small, clear containers, \$2.99 to \$3.49 each, they're bright and fresh. But delectable as they may be, it's not the flavors that make this food so noteworthy—it's the math.

Each portion is 200 calories or less. That means you can pick and choose your lunch with the abandon of a gourmand and the preci-

sion of a dietitian. You've only got 600 calories to spare? So you buy three boxes. Today you're batting 1,000? So you buy a stack of five—or four boxes and a 200-calorie roll. What those 100-calorie packs of Oreos did for snacking, Au Bon Pain is doing for real food. Given the calorie consciousness of our country, this could well become the way we someday eat in upscale restaurants, too. Or at McDonald's.

"The idea was more about boxes, small meals," said Au Bon Pain's marketing veep, Ed Frechette, recalling the line's inspiration. "But when we were testing them, people kept talking about calories."

People were so intrigued by the calorie counts, in fact, "that it was enough to change our whole marketing program," Frechette said. Now plans are in the works for 200-calorie dessert options, breakfast sandwiches, hot cereals—the whole gestalt.

This means that ever-more-insanely demanding consumers

will finally get every gosh darn thing they want. The chance to customize their meals. The chance to customize their calories. The chance to eat healthfully and fast and, if they so choose, the chance to enjoy a morsel or two of something indulgent too, like brie.

"We're always studying trends and traveling," said the chain's executive chef, Thomas John, who traveled to New York from Boston the other day to show off his "Portions." As I ate my way through the BBQ chicken, the Thai peanut chicken, and the tomato, cucumber and chickpea salad (made just the way I like it, with a simple lemon and oil dressing), the chef said, "We're thinking of what food looks like in 2010."

So?

Chef John envisions an ever-widening spectrum of tastes, and thus far he's been right about this. His smoked salmon, herbed cream cheese and wasabi on an onion-dill bagel has become a hot seller at Au Bon Pain, despite the fact it sounds

(to me) way too complicated. By this summer he plans to roll out a hummus/egg/spinach breakfast something-or-other which, again, sounds wacky, but could become the next Egg McMuffin. He's also big on that hitherto health-food-store-only-grain: quinoa, served hot with milk and honey.

Au Bon Pain's strategy has been to put a whole lot of choices out there, including ready-made sandwiches you can grab on the run, and build-it-yourselfers you can customize if you have the time. It does the same with its salads, even while serving up a daily array of a dozen soups, a half-dozen breads and another 90 different baked goods. While the store ends up a little bewildering, this may be exactly what any chain is going to have to offer its customers in the future: Everything for everyone.

And all of it in easy-to-add, calorie-controlled portions, too.

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