



America's Top 5 Healthiest Fast Food Restaurants

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Who hasn't unwrapped a sandwich while driving down the highway or pulled a hard U-turn into a fast-food joint on the way home from a late meeting or soccer game? We practically live in our cars, so we need quick food, and please, we'd like it to be healthy.

Well, guess what: We surveyed the nation's 100 largest fast-food chains, as defined by the number of locations, and found many are creating menus that look more and more like what we'd cook ourselves (if we had the time)—from nutritious soups and healthy salads to fresh whole grains and sensible desserts. Even better: They're offering good-news Mexican, Asian, and Mediterranean fare.

Using [criteria that was created with the help of our expert panel](#), we scored the chains on such factors as the use of healthy fats and preparations, healthy sodium counts in entrees, availability of nutritional information, and the use of organic produce to determine the 10 highest-ranking restaurants.

One big surprise: A traditional fast-food chain, McDonald's, cracked our top 10. Sure, it's the home of the Big Mac, but did you know it also serves a mean yogurt-and-granola parfait? Here, the standouts that are making grabbed food healthy food.

1. Panera Bread

Over 1,230 locations nationwide (and in Canada)

This bakery-cafe-based eatery wowed our judges with a comprehensive menu of healthy choices for every meal. "Variety makes it easy for everyone to choose healthy," praises registered dietitian and panelist Marisa Moore. What does that mean for you? For starters, you can pick from two whole-grain breads for your sandwich and have an apple with it instead of chips (though the chips are fine, too—they can be baked!). Half-size soups, salads, and sandwiches make it a cinch to control portion size. Also, most of the chicken is antibiotic- and hormone-free, a rarity for large chains.

Panera also won top honors for kid fare, dishing out RD-approved crowd-pleasers like squeezable organic yogurt, PB&J (with all-natural peanut butter), and grilled organic cheese on white whole-grain bread.

We love: Delicious, nutrient-packed combos like a half-Turkey Artichoke on focaccia bread with a bowl of black bean or garden vegetable soup.

Danger zone: Sticky buns and cheese danishes are on display at the counter.

[Health.com: The 50 fattiest foods in the states](#)

2. Jason's Deli

206 locations in the West, Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, South

How did this up-and-comer snag second place? Largely because of its devotion to organic food: About one-fifth of all its ingredients are organic, from blue-corn tortilla chips and whole-wheat wraps to field greens and spinach. Plus, its creative salads—like the Nutty Mixed-Up Salad with organic field greens, grapes, chicken breast, feta cheese, walnuts, dried cranberries, pumpkinseeds, raisins, and organic apples—make you actually want to order the greens.

Our judges applauded the portion-control option: Reduced sizes of, say, a stuffed baked potato, are \$1 less. Jason's menu also highlights ultrahealthy sandwiches and provides the nutritional info.

We love: Being able to build any sandwich on an organic whole-wheat wrap.

Danger zone: High-sodium counts on some sandwiches; if sodium is a concern, stick to the ultrahealthy choices.

3. Au Bon Pain

280 locations nationwide

A pioneer in healthy fast food, Au Bon Pain serves up sandwiches, soups, salads, and hot entrees made with whole grains, veggies, and hormone-free chicken.

New this year: Portions, a 14-item menu of nutritious small plates—from appetizers like apples, blue cheese, and cranberries to salads like chickpea and tomato—all of which are less than 200 calories. **Another impressive feature:** Au Bon Pain provides on-site nutritional information via computer kiosks, so before you even order you know each option's calories, fat, and sodium. "It's a great way to empower customers," praises judge Amy Jamieson-Petonic.

We love: Yummy low-cal soups, from Jamaican Black Bean to Fire Roasted Exotic Grains and Vegetables.

Danger zone: The sodium counts can get high if you don't pay attention.

[Health.com: 25 diet-busting foods you should never eat](#)

4. Noodles and Company

204 locations in West, Midwest, South

Noodles and Company isn't your typical greasy Asian food-court joint. In fact, it goes beyond Asian fare and cuts out the grease (only healthy soybean oil is used in sauteing). Here, you choose from three food types: Asian, Mediterranean, or American, then within each style, pick from four noodle bowl options. Lean proteins—hormone- and antibiotic-free chicken, beef, shrimp, and organic tofu—can be added, too.

The result? Tasty combos like Japanese Pan Noodles with broccoli, carrots, shiitake mushrooms, Asian sprouts, and sauteed beef. Also key: "You don't have to chow down on a giant bowl of noodles. You can opt for a small portion," says judge Frances Largeman-Roth, RD, *Health's* Senior Food and Nutrition Editor. The small Bangkok Curry bowl has just 250 calories.

We love: The whole-grain linguine—usually hard to find when eating out.

Danger zone: The desserts. The only options are two kinds of cookies and a Rice Krispy Treat bar that checks in at 530 calories and 19 grams of fat!

5. Corner Bakery Cafe

111 locations in West, Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, South

What sets Corner Bakery apart? A fantastic breakfast menu, which is rare in the quick-serve world. We love the Farmer's Scrambler: eggs scrambled with red and green bell peppers, red onion, mushrooms, potatoes, and Cheddar cheese. (It's only 260 calories when ordered with egg whites.) There's also Swiss oatmeal, a chilled European breakfast cereal made with rolled oats, green apples, bananas, currants, dried cranberries, low-fat yogurt, and skim milk.

But Corner Bakery also has healthy salads, sandwiches, and soups made with whole grains, fresh, lean meats, and vegetables, as well as great portion-controlled combinations that make limiting calories a no-brainer.

We love: Healthy oven-roasted chicken that comes on most pastas and salads.

Danger zone: You have to go to their Web site to get nutritional info.