

Zagat's 2009 list names top 5 fast food salads

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Panera's salads ranked #1 in the Zagat survey. (Matt de Turck)

Zagat, the well-known name in restaurant surveys, has just released the results of a comprehensive fast food survey. Luckily for those seeking healthier options, it's not all burgers and fries. The Zagat's 2009 fast food survey also had at least one category for diners seeking a lower fat option: Best Salads.

The top five highest vote-getters in the salad category, according to the 2009 Zagat results, are:

#1) Panera Bread

It seems like the Panera Bread franchises just sprung up overnight, but now they've become a part of our daily routines. The salads are a huge part of their success, giving the lunch crowd a quick option that's more nutritious than a #3 combo at the local burger joint (although some of the salad toppings, like bacon and hard-boiled eggs should be asked for on the side.)

Signature salads like the Chopped Chicken Cobb and the Strawberry Poppy seed Salad are a refreshing change, and no doubt why Zagat poll-takers picked Panera as number one.

#2) Wendy's

While some of the salad options are not as healthful as they could be (the Southwestern Taco Salad is loaded with cheese and sour cream), Wendy's scores points for having two salad options with grilled chicken rather than the fried chicken that appears on so many fast food salads.

The Chicken Caesar and the Mandarin Chicken Salad are both smart choices for fast food diners, and Zagat reviewers also thought the price was nice.

#3) McDonald's

The fast food giants came in third in Zagat's survey, which shows that their attempt to seem more health-conscious may be paying off, at least psychologically. Patrons should know that many of the salads still contain sugar and a high amount of fat. The Southwest Salad with Crispy Chicken has 20 grams of fat, and all of the salads contain sugar.

Healthy choices can be had at McDonald's, though, by choosing grilled chicken over crispy chicken, and asking for light dressing.

#4) Au Bon Pain

The cafe-style franchise gets points not just for its diverse salad choices, but also for the sheer number of healthy salad dressing options. Fat free raspberry vinaigrette, pomegranate vinaigrette, and sesame ginger are just a few. AuBon Pain has several choices especially for vegans, too.

Salad standouts that likely impressed the Zagat folks for 2009 include a Chickpea and Tomato Cucumber Salad, a Salmon Nicoise, and a Thai Peanut Chicken Salad. Be careful of the calorie count, though: some of these salads are huge!

#5) Corner Bakery Cafe

Coming in as the fifth Best Fast Food Salad on the Zagat's survey is the cafe-style Corner Bakery Cafe, a franchise not presently located in Nashville, but which you can find all over the US when traveling.

The salads are fresh and fairly typical: Chicken Caesar and a standard Chef Salad, for example, but may have scored so well based on the fact that they are freshly prepared and can be paired with a cup of homemade tomato basil soup for a filling, nutritious lunch.

The 2009 Zagat survey polled more than 6,000 people, all of whom eat an average of 6.3 times a month at fast food restaurants (well, well beyond what most nutritionists recommend, which ranges from never to once or twice a month). Zagat reported that the participants ate a total of 806,000 restaurant meals this past year. Let's hope most of those were salads.