

Salt debate spills into restaurant sector

By Douglas Guengua, New York Times

It was a slightly curious gesture: last week, Boston Market, the national chain of rotisserie chicken restaurants, removed the salt shakers from its tables, replacing them with small placards – tucked next to the pepper shakers – promoting the company's interest in reducing sodium.

As a marketing strategy, it was clever, earning the 476-restaurant franchise business more publicity than its popular macaroni and cheese ever could. As a health measure, however, it was unlikely to do more than to make customers shrug and to fire up the longstanding debate over whether people who do not have high blood pressure truly need to limit their salt intake.

“We are removing the temptation to put salt on food right away without even tasting it,” said George Michel, chief executive of Boston Market, in a telephone interview. “As part of our social responsibility and promise to deliver wholesome food, we wanted to take a bold step like this.”

Sodium reduction has lately become a culinary cause célèbre. Subway, Olive Garden, Red Lobster, Burger King and Taco Bell, as well as food manufacturers like Campbell Soup and PepsiCo, have all publicly vowed to produce lower-sodium products. (To a degree: last year, Campbell decided to add sodium back into some of its soups after sales began to slide.)

Critics say the precautions are getting ahead of the science. Unlike tobacco, alcohol and other long-corroborated health risks, sodium remains a topic of sometimes angry debate among researchers. There is no evidence that average people – those without hypertension – need less sodium, critics say, and too

little of the essential nutrient could be as dangerous as too much.

“The science does not support an effort to reduce sodium in people who eat around three and a half grams of sodium a day, and that’s most Americans,” said Michael H. Alderman, editor of the American Journal of Hypertension. “Yet here we are doing silly things that are P.R. Salt shakers only account for about 10 percent of your salt intake. I don’t think it’s ethically justified.”

On the other side are public health advocates – most notably the United States Department of Agriculture, with a strong assist from Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg’s administration in New York.

“There is conclusive evidence that high-salt diets lead to hypertension,” said Michael F. Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest and a leading antisalt flag bearer, “and there is conclusive evidence that hypertension increases the risk of heart attacks and strokes.”

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