**But I Don't Want to Be Upsized!**

By Jeffery Greb

In 2004, Morgan Spurlock filmed an experiment on himself, which consisted of eating nothing but McDonald's food for every meal for a month. He quickly damaged his body, causing immediate weight gain (9.5 lbs. in the first five days alone; 24 lbs. in total), skyrocketed cholesterol levels, mood swings, and sexual problems. It took 14 months on a vegan diet to recover. In the years since that award winning film, *Super Size Me*, Americans by and large still expect huge portions when dining out, even if growing numbers eschew the fast food industry. This tendency becomes all the more stark when exploring other cultures. For example, if you want a larger portion in certain restaurants in Japan, you ask for your order to be "American sized." The root of this persistent American phenomenon is difficult to dig out.

Some other cultures are famous for large meals. A formal feast in Italy, for instance, consists of nine courses: *aperitivo*, *antipasto*, *primo*, *secondo* (with a *contorno*), *insalata*, *formaggi e frutta*, *dolce*, *caffè*, and *digestivo*. While this certainly represents quite a lot of food, it is not an everyday event. (Neither is restaurant dining for the average American, but it occurs more regularly than an Italian feast.) Still, some may take a measure of solace looking at such an impressive list of courses and conclude that we and our European brethren are not so different. Closer examination, however, reveals otherwise. First, the Italian meal is an event in itself. Consequently, the meal is consumed over a much longer time period than an American restaurant can allow if it hopes to make money. Perhaps more importantly, the portion sizes are much smaller than the list might seem to imply. *Primo* is frequently a pasta course, but not the spaghetti with meat sauce familiar to Americans. In fact, while the headings of the courses may be recognizable to Americans, when we order something from the *insalata* section of a menu in this country, we are expecting it be large enough to serve as the entre. Perhaps nothing so starkly demonstrates this difference as the Olive Garden's "Never Ending Pasta Bowl" promotion. Although the Olive Garden will never be confused with fine Italian dining, it offers a completely "Americanized" picture of Italian food.

The "all you can eat" restaurant is itself an American phenomenon. (Try finding all you can eat sushi in Japan.) Obviously, most establishments of this type cater to people on a budget and families with ravenous children. Yet, when called upon to give an evaluation of an eatery, Americans will invariably remark upon the portion size with larger generally considered positive. Why are we like this?

In *A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach* and its supplemental texts, Ruby Payne outlines the differences of the general attitude toward food among three layers of economic class in America: poverty, middle class, and wealth. People in poverty are concerned with quantity. The key question of a dinner guest is: "Did you have enough to eat?" For the middle class, it is a question of quality: "Did you like it?" For the wealthy, aesthetics, the presentation of the meal, become key because the other two qualifiers can be assumed. While this rings true for meals served at home by these groups, as mentioned above expectations seem to change (at least for the middle class) when dining out: the importance of quantity attains renewed significance. Therefore, socio-economic factors alone do not explain our peculiarly American perspective.

A historical lens provides another attractive, yet equally unsatisfying, explanation. Americans raised by parents who lived through the Great Depression had the importance of getting enough to eat and not taking the food on their plates for granted drilled into them. However, the depression was a world-wide event, and other cultures did not have a similar lasting change to their approach toward food. Also, widespread famines, caused by both war and nature, have occurred since, and although victims' attitudes toward food may change, again the impact to the culture does not last.

Whatever it is behind the "American sized" meal, it seems engrained in our collective cultural DNA. Perhaps the same impulse that drives us toward greatness, pushing us to be the most productive workers, to demand bigger and better products of all kinds, to lead the world on so many levels, and sending us to the moon and maybe to Mars, is the root of it all. Or perhaps it is our character to make certain we get our money's worth, to not get hoodwinked – even over dinner, that is the driving force. Hopefully, it is the former. P. T. Barnum purportedly said, "There's a sucker born every minute." Mark Twain said, "A man never reaches that dizzy height of wisdom that he can no longer be led by the nose." After all, thanks to chemicals the "seasoned ground beef" at Taco Bell may be tasty, but is it a value when it is only 12% beef? Can you say obesity epidemic?

As for this American, I just try not to eat anything larger than my head.