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# Food

## Smarter Food: Programs aim to help diners find healthful, sustainable meals

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Jeffrey MacMillan/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST - Canned produce greets customers at Founding Farmers, one of several Washington-area restaurants approved by REAL Certified. The organization aims to steer diners toward more healthful and sustainable menus.

Study after study shows that Americans want to eat more healthful and sustainable food. But in restaurant dining — and 50 percent of American meals are now consumed outside the home — making the right choice can be daunting. The Cobb salad at Cusi has 709 calories and 54 grams of fat, more than a Whopper at Burger King. And despite the trend of noting farms on the menus at upscale restaurants, at most meals diners have few clues about where their food comes from.

Several ambitious organizations are aiming to take the guesswork out of eating out. Each has its own certification program that aims to make it easier for diners to find places that have undertaken the complex process of serving healthful food from farms committed to animal welfare and sustainable growing practices.

The first, REAL Certified, is a homegrown initiative. It formally launched in the District in April with 20 restaurants, including Ris, Nora, Energy Kitchen and Founding Farmers. This month it announced that it had certified four cafes, including one at Google, run by corporate caterer Guckenheimer. REAL, which stands for Responsible Epicurean and Agricultural Leadership, is modeled after the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED certification, which rewards builders for using sustainable materials and energy-efficient systems. REAL Certified doles out points to restaurants for offering a certain percentage of dishes containing vegetables, whole grains, local and organic ingredients and alternatives to sugary sodas, among other things.

“We are trying to figure out which restaurants are doing the right things and give them credit,” says Lawrence Williams, founder of the United States Healthful Food Council, a nonprofit, nongovernmental group that oversees the program. Williams does not come from a food background. For eight years, he handled government relations for SpaceX, a private space exploration company. Before that, he worked on Capitol Hill. But health is his passion; he just finished his third Ironman Triathlon in Rio de Janeiro.

Until now, Williams says, it has been more profitable for restaurants to serve cheap food laden with the fat and sugar that diners crave. The goal of REAL Certified, he says, “is to create a virtuous circle. Our program encourages people that are doing the right things and puts pressure on those who aren't.”

SPE Certified has a similar model. The three letters stand for Sanitas Per Escam, Latin for “health through food.” Certified dishes, except for desserts, may use no butter or cream. Ingredients cannot be fried or grilled (because of the carcinogens associated with charring). But founder Emmanuel Verstraeten says SPE is less about what chefs can't use than about what they can. His culinary team works with restaurants with the goal of offering delicious and satisfying dishes without resorting to the easy tricks that make restaurant food so

unhealthy. The program also rates restaurants on their sourcing and environmental impact.

SPE principles are on display at Verstraeten's Rouge Tomate, a Michelin-starred restaurant in Midtown Manhattan. The elegant space is full of blond wood and vases of green apples. It even has a juice bar. But nothing about it feels preachy. On the day I visited, I tasted a bright walu sevice, with avocado, yuzu and snap peas; and "farroto," a satisfying twist on risotto, made with whole-grain farro, porcini, Parmesan and asparagus. "Taste is always first," Verstraeten says. "You need to enjoy your food. It is the best way to get people to eat healthy."

When SPE launched in May 2012, Verstraeten says, he believed that independent, fine-dining restaurants would be attracted. Some are. But many chefs are anxious about letting a nutritionist have the final word on their food. Instead, SPE is making headway at larger institutions. Celebrity Cruises offers SPE-certified dishes such as tomato-watermelon salad, roasted pork loin and olive-oil custard in its main dining room and spa. The University of Massachusetts has worked with SPE to improve the nutrition and portion sizes of its most popular dishes, such as shepherd's pie.

The newest entrant to the U.S. market is Britain's Sustainable Restaurant Association. The SRA has certified 500 restaurants across the pond, from glamorous Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in Oxfordshire to the Carluccio's chain, with 45 locations. The SRA rates restaurants on 14 criteria in three areas: society (healthful food, responsible marketing), environment (water conservation, waste management) and sourcing (serving local and seasonal items, ethically raised meats). Applicants answer a 90-question survey and must provide evidence (menus, invoices, etc.) to back up their claims. In addition to their rating of one, two or three stars, restaurants receive a report outlining where they can improve and are assigned a manager to work with them to make changes.

The SRA has been operating in Britain since 2010. Last month it decided to offer its certification around the world, and it is in the process of certifying its first class of U.S. restaurants. "There are so many brands and certification schemes," says Mark Linehan, the SRA's managing director. "With people traveling more, and more aware of what is going on around the world, we felt it would be helpful to have a single certification that is recognizable."

As they say in England: "Quite." The whole point of certifications was to simplify decisions for consumers. Now that there are so many, diners have to do research to figure out which one to trust.

It is still early days for the programs. But if health is your focus, the most reliable certification might be SPE's. Its criteria are the most rigorous and have been

reviewed by experts at the Harvard School of Public Health and the Tufts Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy. Based on what I ate at Rouge Tomate, SPE's culinary team knows how to help chefs coax flavor out of healthful ingredients without causing diners to miss a thing. (That might not hold true for Southern and barbecue restaurants, many of which by their nature would run afoul of SPE's bans on grilling, butter and lard.)

But the other certifiers have their merits. In addition to its review program, REAL Certified is looking into helping its restaurants band together to buy local and sustainable products at a discount. The strength of SRA, a veteran in the field at three years old, is its breadth of criteria; restaurants also get credit for responsible marketing to children and engagement in their community.

"It's hard to argue with any sincere attempt to allow an outside group to take a look at worthwhile efforts, evaluating and articulating results," says Clark Wolf, a restaurant consultant based in New York and Sonoma County, Calif. "That said, it's a marketing move, like sponsoring the local baseball team used to be. It's a modern way of saying, 'We're good community members, and we have the logo stamp to prove it.'"

Still, the certifications are a starting point for diners who want to make good decisions without getting a headache, and an incentive for restaurateurs to make responsible choices.

"For me, a certification speaks to what I want to do," says chef Ris Lacoste of Ris. "And the process encourages me to do better."

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/smarter-food-programs-aim-to-help-diners-find-healthful-sustainable-meals/2013/06/24/64498ff8-d47a-11e2-a73e-826d299ff459\\_story\\_1.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/smarter-food-programs-aim-to-help-diners-find-healthful-sustainable-meals/2013/06/24/64498ff8-d47a-11e2-a73e-826d299ff459_story_1.html)