Eating out without the guilt

Oftentimes, dining out or ordering takeaway is a necessity, but that doesn't mean you should mindlessly accept less healthy meals.

By GEORGEN THYE and CHIN YI YING

IN the fast-paced rhythm of modern life, the home kitchen stove often stays cold.

Between demanding work schedules, long commutes and the sheer convenience of food delivery apps, dining out has transitioned from an occasional luxury to a daily necessity.

In fact, 64% of Malaysians have at least one meal a day away from home according to the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines 2020.

For many, the home-cooked meal has been replaced by foods from the hawker stall, the neighbourhood mamak restaurants or the glowing screen of a smartphone.

While convenient, this shift presents a significant health challenge.

Restaurant and street foods are often designed for flavour first, which means meals can be heavy on refined carbohydrates, sodium (salt) and oil.

It's easy to feel guilty about not cooking, but health isn't an "all-or-nothing" game.

You don't have to abandon your favourite eateries; you just need a strategy of smarter choices.

Mastering the menu

Whether you are standing in a humid hawker centre or sitting in a climate-controlled bistro, the power lies in your order.

Most vendors are more willing than you think to accommodate simple requests, provided you know what to ask for.

> **Choose the right cooking method**

The cooking method is often as important as the ingredients.

When scanning a menu, look for keywords that signal lower calorie density and higher nutrient retention.

Opt for grilled, steamed, roasted or poached items, and avoid crispy, battered, breaded or deep-fried dishes.

In a restaurant setting, choosing a grilled sea bass over a fried fish fillet can save hundreds of calories and a significant amount of oil.

In a cafe, a poached egg on whole-grain toast is far superior to a heavy pastry or a deep-fried breakfast platter.

> **The portion control strategy**

In many cultures, generosity is shown through large portions of starch.

A standard plate of economy rice (*nasi campur*) or a bowl of noodles often contains enough carbohydrates for two people.

To combat this, embrace the phrases "*nasi sikit*" (less rice) or "*mee sikit*" (less noodles).

By consciously reducing the base of the meal, you create physical space on your plate – and nutritional space in your diet – for more greens and proteins.

If you're at a mixed rice stall, apply the "*Suku Suku Separuh*" concept: fill a quarter of your plate with protein, a quarter with grains, and half with vegetables and fruits.

> **Slashing salt, oil and sugar**

The hidden culprits in outside food are often the liquids: the sauces, gravies and drinks.

These are where the highest concentrations of sodium, oil and sugar reside.

Sauce is often the vehicle for excessive oil and salt.

Instead of having your rice or meat drenched in gravy, ask for "*kuah asing*" (sauce on the side).

This allows you to dip your food for flavour, rather than having it soaked in extra oil and salt.

This is particularly effective with dishes like chicken rice or steak; you control the intake, not the chef.

It is a cultural staple to pair a meal with a sweet tea or a carbonated soft drink, but these "liquid calories" spike blood sugar and provide minimal fullness.

If you must have your *teh tarik* or iced coffee, always ask for "*kurang manis*" (less sweet).

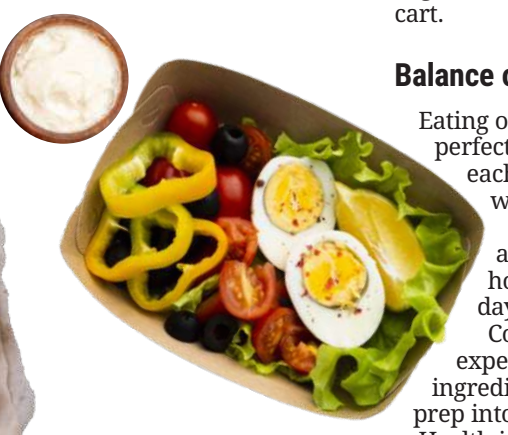
But it is best to opt for plain water, or unsweetened tea or coffee.

If you find plain water boring, ask for a slice of lemon or lime to add zest without the added sugar.

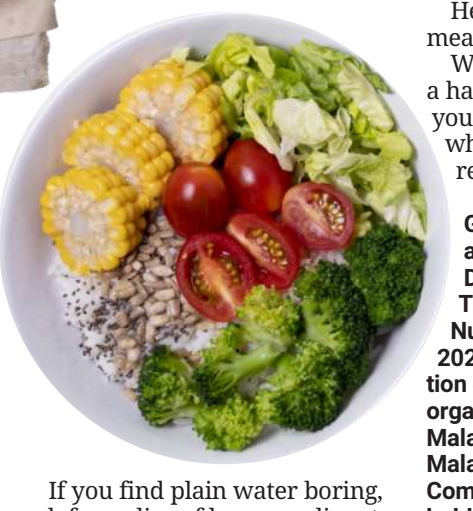
A bowl of noodle soup seems healthy, but the broth is often a sodium bomb, and the noodles are usually over-portioned.

Request extra vegetables in your soup and leave half the broth in the bowl.

These are simple requests you can make at almost any stall or restaurant every time you eat out.



Don't be afraid to request less oil or salt, or more vegetables, in the 'remarks' section of food delivery apps. — Magnific



Healthy food delivery

The "Add to Cart" button is the modern-day pantry.

While food delivery is the ultimate convenience, it can lead to mindless ordering.

To stay healthy while ordering online, you can be your own advocate in the "Remarks" section.

> **Customise the order**

Don't be afraid to use the notes field.

Requests like "less salt", "extra cucumber" or "less oil" are frequently honoured by kitchens.

> **Scan for "healthier choice" tags**

Many delivery platforms now tag dishes that are lower in calories or use whole grains.

Use these filters to narrow your search before the hunger-induced "cravings" take over.

> **The *"nasi lemak"* hack**

When ordering a classic *nasi lemak*, start by requesting "*sambal asing*" – sambal is often cooked with significant amounts of sugar and oil, so having it on the side lets you control how much you use.

As the coconut rice and fried anchovies are already calorie-dense on their own, balance the plate by adding an order of extra vegetables or a side salad to the cart.

Balance over perfection

Eating out healthily is not about perfection; it is about making each meal a little better with a little thought.

And when you do get a chance to cook at home on weekends or off days, treat it as a bonus.

Consider it a chance to experiment with fresh ingredients and turn meal prep into quality family time.

Health is a journey taken one meal at a time.

Whether that meal comes from a hawker stall, a delivery app or your own kitchen, the choice of what goes into your body remains yours.

Georgen Thye and Chin Yi Ying are members of the Malaysian Dietitians' Association (MDA).

This article is contributed by Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) 2026, an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM), MDA and the Malaysian Society of Body Composition (MSBC). NMM will be holding its Food-Fit-Fun Fair in Sunway Velocity Mall Cheras, Kuala Lumpur, on June 4-7. **The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only, and should not be considered as medical advice. *The Star* does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this article. *The Star* disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.**