

Program: RESTAURANTS

Restaurant Guests Just Ask for Healthier Choices with a Heart!

Rockland County, NY, January 2008— The *Just Ask Us!* restaurant program was introduced to Rockland County in the summer of 2005 to increase the availability and awareness of healthier food choices. Since then, Rockland County's Steps to a HealthierNY, with assistance from the Rockland County Department of Health (DOH) and community members, has worked with local restaurants across the county to encourage them to highlight healthier menu options – *and it is working!*

Currently there are 80 restaurants participating in the program resulting in over 950 menu items across the county marked as healthier choices. It is estimated that 92,000 customers visit the 80 *Just Ask Us!* restaurants in a one-week period. Many participating restaurants say that they have increased vendor orders for healthier items such as produce and whole-grain products. The owner of Mia Cucina in Blauvelt said: *"This is a fantastic program. Requests for whole-wheat pasta have increased so that now I order one case of whole-wheat pasta once a week. Prior to this program I only ordered it once a month."*

Restaurants also report that more customers are asking for healthier menu options and substitutions. One customer noted: *"I don't make a healthy choice when the information isn't available"*.

Decals on restaurant doors, brochures, red heart labels, and tabletop information in the restaurants enhance and encourage customers to "make the healthier choice". All materials are supplied, free of charge, to restaurants. When customers were asked: Would the healthier items and substitutions influence your decision to return to this restaurant - 64% answered yes!

Restaurant owners are also benefiting on the "bottom line" as illustrated by the owner of Ole' Ole' who encouragingly noted: *"I am surprised how many more parents are choosing to eat at my restaurant since I have highlighted and offer a 'healthier choice' on the children's menu."*

A father sitting with his wife and children at a family restaurant stated: *"We now know what to eat and what not to eat."* Step-by-step, the attitudes and knowledge of our local residents are changing.

For more information call the Rockland County DOH at 845-364-2500
or visit the STEPS website at www.rocklandsteps.org