

PICTURE-PERFECT DIET

JUST A PHOTO ATTACHMENT AWAY,
FIND FOOD ADVICE

By MARY HUHN



The Post's Mary Huhn uses her cell to document a veggie burger for her online nutritionist.

Photo: Liz Sullivan

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May 23, 2006 -- BEFORE I dug into the plate of steak poivre, crispy-edged hand-cut fries and a side of grilled asparagus at the East Village's Counter the other night, I flipped open my cellphone and snapped a picture.

Then I artfully set up a glass of wine against a candle and shot that, too. Finally I took a photo of our table's shared half-eaten chocolate tart.

It wasn't for some foodie art project. It was for My Food Phone, a new Sprint service that, for \$9.99 a month, monitors your diet and nutrition.

Here's how it works: After you register, simply e-mail the photos to your new personalized Web page.

Once there, divvy up each meal according to the food groups and note portion sizes. In the commentary area, you can add details - in my case, I noted that it was vegetarian seitan steak and I had two glasses of cabernet.

After you enter in all the requested information, just wait for the verdict.

A few days into my picture-sending, I received a video message from "Jason," my personal nutritional adviser. The first couple of notes are all about cheerleading, and they're accompanied by videos (just over a minute long) on portions and food groups.

But about two weeks after registering, after he had a sense of my dietary lifestyle, Jason got personal.

In one streaming video, he tells me I should have a bigger breakfast - two eggs and a whole-wheat English muffin aren't enough. He attaches a video about the importance of breakfast, which suggests a side of fruit.

In the second video message, Jason praises my balanced meals, but gently scolds me for snacking. If I'm really hungry - and it's not just a habit - then grab a piece of fruit instead of that Skinny Cow mint ice-cream sandwich.

But the third video was a lot of fun.

"You seem to enjoy wine," he says. "Nothing wrong with that, but I want you to be aware of how it affects weight control."

He had my number - and attached a video about alcoholic beverages (and one on healthy snacking).

In the most recent video critique, Jason noticed that I traded in ice cream and cookies for healthy fruit, which made me feel proud.

But he suggested that I lighten up on protein and eat more vegetables.

These may all be things one already knows to do, but Jason helps to reinforce good food habits.

I think twice before ordering a second glass of red wine or having some afternoon cookies (even if they are trans-fat free).

It's a little high-maintenance. Picture-taking can be a chore, although if you forget, you can just type in the details of a meal. But for all extra work - and a little dough - you get personal advice from your own Jason - twice a month.

The process also makes users realize exactly how much they are actually consuming.

"A picture tells 1,000 calories," says Marc Onigman, spokesman for the service.

"People mindlessly eat - at movies, in front of the TV, at sporting events. This changes all that. In the back of your mind, you know Jason is waiting for your numbers. Jason is your Jiminy Cricket."

You can e-mail the service for feedback or put messages in your meal details, but there's no direct contact with your personal adviser - you can't tell Jason that you were having a bad day, an off week, or were PMSing.

The food tells the whole story.

"Can you cheat? Sure," says Onigman. "You can take a picture of a salad and then eat a pizza. But numbers won't lie." (There's a place to record your weight as well as any exercise you perform.)

A colorful "dashboard," tells users at a glance if they're getting too much of one food group and not enough of another.

"We have the best advice available. The rest is up to you," says Onigman.

I know a lot about healthy living and eating, but still, it's easy to kid yourself about what and when you eat or drink, and to slip onto bad habits. My Food Phone can help get you back on track - whether you want to lose weight or not.

One thing is certain: I have newfound respect for food stylists.

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