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By Bob Batz Jr., Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The food for which Oakland is famous isn't health food. Fries and hotdogs from the "O" -- Original Hot Dog Shop -- come to mind. Dave & Andy's ice cream. Yum.

But a new program will spotlight healthier lunch options at several eateries and other places that sell food in the neighborhood, ranging from landmarks such as Dave & Andy's to the new Legume, from ethnic restaurants to a community center cafe, even two groceries and two gas stations.

Starting Friday, 15 eateries and food businesses will be posting window decals inviting the hungry hordes of university students, faculty and staff and UPMC workers to "Eat Smart! Eat Here!" Many will be offering new menu items and specials. Participating places also are mapped on a new brochure to publicize the pilot program that's already rolled out online.

"We would like to see many more restaurants" join, says Georgia Petropoulos Muir. She's executive director of the Oakland Business Improvement District, which is one of the partners on the program along with the four other groups in the Oakland Neighborhood Partnership (Community Human Services Corp., Oakland Community Council, Oakland Transportation Management Association and People's Oakland).

As she explains, the program is part of a healthier living initiative funded through the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Action Communities for Health, Innovation and Environmental Change (ACHIEVE) program. The University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing and the Allegheny County Health Department also are partners in ACHIEVE, which has other components aimed at making life healthier for Oakland residents.

But the lunch promotion aims to benefit everybody who lunches in the neighborhood, as well as reward the businesses willing to put a more healthful spin on their lunchtime offerings.

To get the program going, some 15 eateries and food businesses were interviewed this past winter by 40 graduate students in a health promotion class taught by Pitt nursing associate professor and registered nurse Heidi Donovan.

She says students asked if the businesses thought customers wanted healthy fare, how much of that they already provided, how interested they were in changing their menus to provide more, and what incentives might help them to do so.

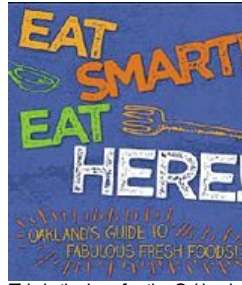
Then the students researched, brainstormed and shared ideas that the businesses could adopt.

For example, one student suggested that Dave & Andy's pump up its healthier toppings -- raisins and nuts instead of chocolate chips. She even suggested it offer a reverse sundae -- a lot of fruit topped with a little ice cream instead of the other way around.

If it seems even odder that gas station convenience stores are part of the effort, Ms. Donovan points out that lots of people, especially in neighborhoods with food security issues, depend on such places. "If we can find a way to make it worth the business owners' time and effort to make the changes, it'll go a long way to improving people's access to food."

The nursing students heard from business owners, such as Lulu's Noodles' David Yan, about the realities on their end, too. So rather than suggest changing whole menus, the students suggested adding menu inserts highlighting existing healthier options. Instead of creating new dishes, they suggested, restaurants could use different oils, less salt, maybe whole-wheat instead of regular pizza crust.

As Ms. Donovan puts it, "You have to start small."



This is the logo for the Oakland Business Improvement District's new "Eat Smart, Eat Here" campaign.

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And you have to start somewhere. It's easy to eat healthy at the Red Oak Cafe, where that's what the place is all about. A typical pub and pizza joint are different. Ms. Donovan says, "I think a lot of the restaurants see themselves serving ... a particular kind of craving."

But any of them can also promote healthier eating. Dave & Andy's owner Andy Hardy notes that the ice cream shop sells fat-free sorbets and frozen yogurts and low-fat ice creams. On Friday, it will introduce a reverse sundae, made with less ice cream on cooked peaches and berries.

Peter's Pub has already gotten good reaction to past changes such as offering fresh vegetables daily as an option to french fries, says general manager Nick Pawlenko. So Friday, the pub plans to start this campaign by offering two smart specials: A Salmon Burger (\$6.50) and a new Cucumber Salad Sandwich (\$5.95), both served with a salad or steamed vegetable.

Red Oak Cafe is offering a wild Asian Salmon Salad and a three-grain side salad.

Milano's Pizza is going to start offering whole-wheat pastas and pizza dough made with 30 percent whole-wheat flour as an option, but owner Ben Sciulli says it'll take a while to get it right. "I'm hoping by the end of October it should be ready to go."

Places' healthier offerings are expected to continue to evolve.

The Pitt nursing students made other suggestions for ACHIEVE's ultimate goal of having more healthy and affordable food in the community, from having Oakland chefs demonstrate at the Oakland Farmers Market (already implemented) to having roving produce carts.

It all ties in with community gardens, health fairs and the like. Says Ms. Donovan, "All these things are really small, but at a certain point, you realize change is happening."

Participating businesses so far, along with the Oakland Farmers Market:

Dave & Andy's Ice Cream at 207 Atwood St.; Legume at 214 N. Craig St.; Red Oak Cafe at 3610 Forbes Ave.; Milano's Pizza at 3606 Fifth Ave.; Lulu's Noodles at 400 S. Craig St.; AJ's Peruvian Chicken at 3608 Fifth Ave.; Peter's Pub at 116 Oakland Ave.; Crepes Parisienne at 207 Craig St.; Oiishi Bento at 119 Oakland Ave.; Prince of India at 3614 Fifth Ave.; Groceria Merante at 3454 Bates St.; Sunoco at 195 N. Craig St.; Exxon at 3500 Forbes Ave.; IGA Market on Forbes at 3609 Forbes Ave.; and Smile 'N Dine Cafe at 372 Lawn St. (Community Health Services Corp.).

The list will be updated at onlyinoakland.org.

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