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# Recession is good for Sacramento County's fast food restaurants

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Unless your home is near livestock, you probably live close to a Starbucks or Subway in Sacramento County.

While fine-dining and even casual sit-down restaurants have suffered, the fast food segment has propelled right through the recession, with many chains posting gains and adding new locations as diners eschew more expensive options.

The five largest fast food and coffee chains in Sacramento County collectively have grown 4 percent during the past year and 21 percent since 2005, according to a Bee review of records from the county, which tracks every restaurant so it can undergo food safety inspections.

Nine out of 10 people in the county now live within two miles of either a Subway or a Starbucks, property records show.

And about eight out of 10 people live within two miles of any of the county's other most prolific quick-serve restaurants: McDonald's, Taco Bell and Carl's Jr.

The saturation of fast food restaurants, like the saturation of fat on their menus, is an ongoing phenomenon that draws criticism from nutritionists and disdain from food snobs.

At the same time, these restaurants are convenient, quick and inexpensive. Many fast food restaurants also offer multiple healthy items. Some, like Subway, heavily advertise their healthy options.

"I'm single, and I like to cook at home, but sometimes you are in a rush and you need something to eat," said Sacramento resident Steve Shulman, sitting at a bus stop on Broadway in view of a McDonald's, Taco Bell, Carl's Jr. and Subway.

Shulman figures he dines on fast food 10 to 20 times a month. He's careful what he gets at fast food outlets. "Some of these places have healthy food," Shulman said.

It all comes down to what you order. At Subway, a 6-inch veggie sandwich has 230 calories; a meatball sub has 580. At McDonald's, a honey mustard snack wrap has 260 calories; an

angus bacon and cheese burger has 790. At Carl's Jr., a charbroiled chicken salad has 250 calories; a "Big Carl" burger has 920.

The relationship between fast food and poor health is complicated and muddied by myriad factors.

Sacramento County has a higher obesity rate than the state average, and a higher number of fast food restaurants per capita than the state average. But several urban counties like San Diego, San Francisco and Los Angeles have a lower proportion of obese residents but a similar number of fast food restaurants per capita.

In recent years, the growth of the traditional fast food outlet - burger joints - has fallen far behind that of sandwich and coffee shops.

Subway has expanded locally by 31 percent since 2005, compared with 28 percent internationally. With almost 100 Sacramento County outlets, the sandwich chain has more local eateries than anyone else.

Starbucks, which has exploded by 131 percent internationally in the past five years, grew 50 percent locally and now has more than 80 outlets in Sacramento County. The coffee giant has shrunk its local presence slightly in the past 12 months as part of national cuts. The local figures include only corporate stores, not those licensing the Starbucks brand.

McDonald's, Carl's Jr. and Taco Bell all have grown locally since 2005, but just by one to three restaurants apiece, county records show.

Nationwide, sales for the \$163.7 billion fast food industry are expected to jump 4 percent from last year, according to the National Restaurant Association. That compares with a 2.5 percent gain projected for the restaurant industry as a whole.

The proliferation of fast food restaurants has primed the American palate so that we have come to expect a virtual smorgasbord in any urban or semi-urban setting, said Ron Santibanez, a Riverside restaurant consultant.

For instance, in the Sacramento region, 75 percent of all McDonald's restaurants are within a mile of a Subway or Taco Bell, the Bee's review found. Fast food outlets are concentrated along freeway exits and in population centers.

"It's convenient to have all the restaurants at the same offramp," Santibanez said.

Whether the industry's steady growth can be sustained is an open question.

There is almost one fast food restaurant or coffee shop for every 1,000 residents of Sacramento County, about 6 percent higher than the statewide ratio, according to the state Economic Development Department.

With so many restaurants, "I don't think there is much more room for big brands," Santibanez said.

The midsize players in the 200- to 400-store range nationally, such as In-N-Out Burger with 231 stores, will prevail in the future, he said.

Others say there's still room for growth - and the next big food concept.

"If some of these quick-service establishments are in fact expanding their customer base during this challenging period, they may actually come out in a stronger position when the economy improves," said Bruce Grindy, chief economist for the National Restaurant Association.

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