

Veggie temptations

30 June 2017

A Stanford University study has found that people were more likely to choose vegetable dishes when they carried indulgent names. For example, 'twisted citrus-glazed carrots' were more popular than the same dish labelled simply as 'carrots', despite no difference in how they were prepared or served.

Every weekday of the 2016 autumn quarter (46 days), the university canteen served vegetable dishes, prepared and presented in exactly the same way, but labelled in 1 of 4 ways: basic, indulgent, healthy restrictive, or healthy positive (see table 1). The researchers recorded the number of times that the vegetables were chosen, and measured their portion weights.

Basic	Indulgent	Healthy restrictive	Healthy positive
Carrot	Twisted citrus-glazed carrots	Carrots with sugar-free citrus dressing	Smart-choice vitamin C citrus carrots
Beets	Dynamite chilli and tangy lime-seasoned beets	Lighter-choice beets with no added sugar	High-antioxidant beets
Sweet potatoes	Zesty ginger-tumeric sweet potatoes	Cholesterol-free sweet potatoes	Wholesome sweet potato superfood
Bok Choy and mushrooms	Tangy ginger bok choy and banzai shiitake mushrooms	Low-sodium bok choy and mushrooms	Wholesome bok choy and mushrooms

Table 1: Examples of labels assigned to vegetable dishes at Stanford University canteen.

The study found that the dishes popularity varied significantly depending on their name. The healthy restrictive ones (e.g. 'lighter choice' 'free from' 'low-sodium') were least popular, while the indulgently named ones were:

- 25% more popular than the basic,
- 41% more popular than the healthy restrictive, and
- 35% more popular than the healthy positive named dishes.

Not only were the indulgently named veggie dishes selected by more people, they were also taken in larger portions.

This study reveals an interesting, low-cost way to encourage healthier choices, and increase vegetable

consumption in restaurants and canteens. It also challenges the assumption that highlighting health benefits may boost vegetable consumption. Further research could focus on analysing the effect of indulgent descriptors in different settings, or populations (e.g. children), and could explore the use of indulgent labelling in reversing the common mindset that healthy foods do not taste good.

Reference: [Turnwald BP, Boles DZ, & Crum AJ \(2017\). Association between indulgent descriptions and vegetable consumption: Twisted Carrots and Dynamite Beets. JAMA Internal Medicine. Published online ahead of print June 12 2017. Doi: 10.1001/jamainternmed.2017.1637](#)