

## U Food Grill

### Fast food goes diet friendly

By Bart Zino

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A few weeks ago, I took a cruise down to Cabo San Lucas and learned very quickly that some of the most dangerous advice anyone can give you is “go ahead, eat what you want! You’re on vacation!” It sounded like a good idea at the time, so like a teenager with a credit card, I went all out on the buffet line and told myself to worry about the consequences later.

“Later” reared its ugly head early one Sunday morning on a scale in my bathroom. I realized that if I was ever going to work off all the pounds I had put on, I was going to have to bid a tearful farewell to fried food, trans fats and midnight snacks for a while. Eating well was going to be a challenge, especially on a college budget like mine, and to make matters worse, a rather pessimistic voice in the back of my head kept nagging, “You’ll never be able to do that in Naples.”

Enter U Food Grill – a small “fast casual” establishment nestled comfortably in the middle of the Piper’s Crossing Shopping Plaza, at the intersection of Immokalee and Airport roads. Naples is currently the only city in the U.S. to have a U Food Grill, but the restaurant is actually part of a larger nationwide chain, the Boston-based KnowFat Lifestyles Grill, which recently changed its name to U Food Grill. The Naples location was the first to open under the new name.



While it’s tempting to suggest the contrary, U Food Grill is not technically a health food restaurant - it’s just good food done smarter. There’s still mozzarella, chipotle mayo and plenty of beef on the menu, but you won’t find any deep fryers here; everything is baked, grilled, boiled or steamed. What you will find are a variety of salads, sandwiches, wraps and even a selection of burgers and fries (the fries are brushed with soy bean oil and then baked). Furthermore, U Food’s ingredients are organic “whenever possible,” according to the menu. Even so, I had my doubts about how good any of this could really taste.

After consulting the restaurant's dietary guide, which offers suggestions of diet-friendly items for people going low-carb or low-sodium, I sauntered up to the counter and placed my orders. Then we headed over to the drink and condiment stations. Besides the standard soft drinks and iced tea, you could also get green tea, and next to the drinks we saw olive oil, balsamic vinegar, steak sauce and more. My friend also eagerly pointed out the steak knives.

We didn't have to wait long for our food, and sat down to dig in. I had chosen the bistro salad (\$5.49), which came loaded with feta cheese, walnuts, grape tomatoes, cranberries and onions and lightly tossed in a blueberry-pomegranate vinaigrette. I also decided to try a cup of the three-bean chili with steak (\$4.49). My salad was light and crisp, and the vinaigrette added a fruity element that was surprisingly tasty without being overwhelming. The chili meanwhile was rich and hearty and came with big tender pieces of sirloin steak.

My friend had ordered a combo platter of fire-grilled steak tips and "Kickin' Thai Chicken," with sides of broccoli and mashed sweet potatoes (the most expensive item on the menu at a whopping \$10.49). She was really impressed with how tender the sirloin was, and said she also really enjoyed the chicken, commenting on the sweet and spicy flavor of the chili sauce that came with it.



With drinks included, we'd only racked up a total bill of \$22.23, which sounded more like the kind of price tag you'd expect to find in a college town than in ritzy Naples. My friend, a proud Florida Gator, happily noted, "These are Gainesville prices!"

Besides the health-conscious menu, I also appreciated the fact that U Food strives to be environmentally friendly. Instead of "disposable" paper and plastic, they use "real" plates and silverware, and signs by the condiment bar encourage customers to take only what they need to avoid unnecessary waste. Even the cups, while plastic, are meant to be taken home as souvenirs.

Overall, U Food Grill was a far cry from the typical "health food" restaurant that I had imagined it to be. It proved that smart, healthy food can taste great and still be affordable. Combine that value with their environmental consciousness, and you've got a winning model that really makes you wonder why there aren't more places like it. As we got ready to leave, my friend and I both agreed, this was one place we'd be sure to return to.

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