

Creating a Healthy America, One Hamburger at a Time

by Angie Heile

Right now, Amanda West is training for a marathon. As part of her preparation, she is adhering to a wholesome, and temporarily vegetarian, diet. The recent Stanford MBA graduate, however, also has a day job: applying her entrepreneurial skills to a particularly thorny problem of concern to the USDA,

the FDA, the NIH, and beachgoers across America. The problem is the obesity epidemic—and she plans to do something about it by opening a chain of hamburger restaurants called Amanda's.

"Two thirds of the [American] population is overweight or obese," West says. "At the same time, most people don't want to be that way; 71 percent of people want to maintain a healthy weight. So there's a discrepancy. People don't want to be the way they are, but then why are they? I think there are a lot of reasons, but one of the reasons is that people aren't willing to give up convenience for health."

Imagine that you're making dinner and 300,000 hungry Americans are your clients. They have big appetites, are in a hurry, and insist on eating the same foods they've eaten since earliest childhood. ("Hamburgers and French fries are the most-ordered menu items by men and women, respectively, in America. And that's been true for decades," West says.) Sure, refuse the customers' wishes if you're concerned about their health, but they are likely to grumble and head out to the nearest burger joint. So what do you do? Build a better burger shop, of course.

"The concept is Whole Foods meets In-N-Out Burger," she explains. "We strive to be as simple as In-N-Out, and that's convenient because there's not

too much choice. We aren't just burgers and fries, but we're not everything. Whole Foods has fresh salads and fruits, and we'll have that. There will be meal-sized salads, veggie burgers, and grilled chicken sandwiches, so there's something for everyone. But it's still a pretty simple menu....It's convenient food and it's comfortable." Putting together those comfortable offerings, West plans to use organic produce whenever possible and always use hormone-free and family-farmed meat.

Making healthier fast food isn't anything new, but many hopefuls have found the details of implementation confounding. The pioneers found that healthy practices, given the

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constraints of customers' demand for the foods they've grown up with, involve compromises and carry risk of disaster. But difficulty also inspires innovation: West mentions Smart Alec's on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley as a rare successful example. The college-campus location seems to be key; she's still scouting a location for her first Amanda's restaurant, but West expects to locate it in the Palo Alto area.

Ah, but those details: Convenient, comfortable, simple, and healthy food is pretty hard to do. To ensure that it has solid nutritional credentials, West hired Diane Hester, former director of clinical nutrition at Stanford Medical Center and Lucile Packard Children's Hospital, to delineate guidelines for each menu item and for meal combinations. She then brought the guidelines to chefs whose resumé's include stints at L'Orangerie, Alain Rondelli, and La Scene, and worked with them to devise recipes that fulfill fast-food cravings with less reliance on fat and calories.

The resulting offerings top out at 425 calories, and the menu's structured so that diners can put together 10 different meals containing 600 calories or less. All meals are designed to provide a proper balance of fruits and vegetables, carbohydrates, and protein. The one-page menu does all this by combining fast-food favorites with surprising innovations, such as a side dish that West describes enigmatically as "a secret new way of serving apples."

Despite the emphasis on nutrition, West downplays actual health claims. "We don't say that we're healthy fast food—because then vegetarians would say, well, red meat's not healthy. Or they'd say, potatoes aren't healthy. Or this, or that—but we're going to

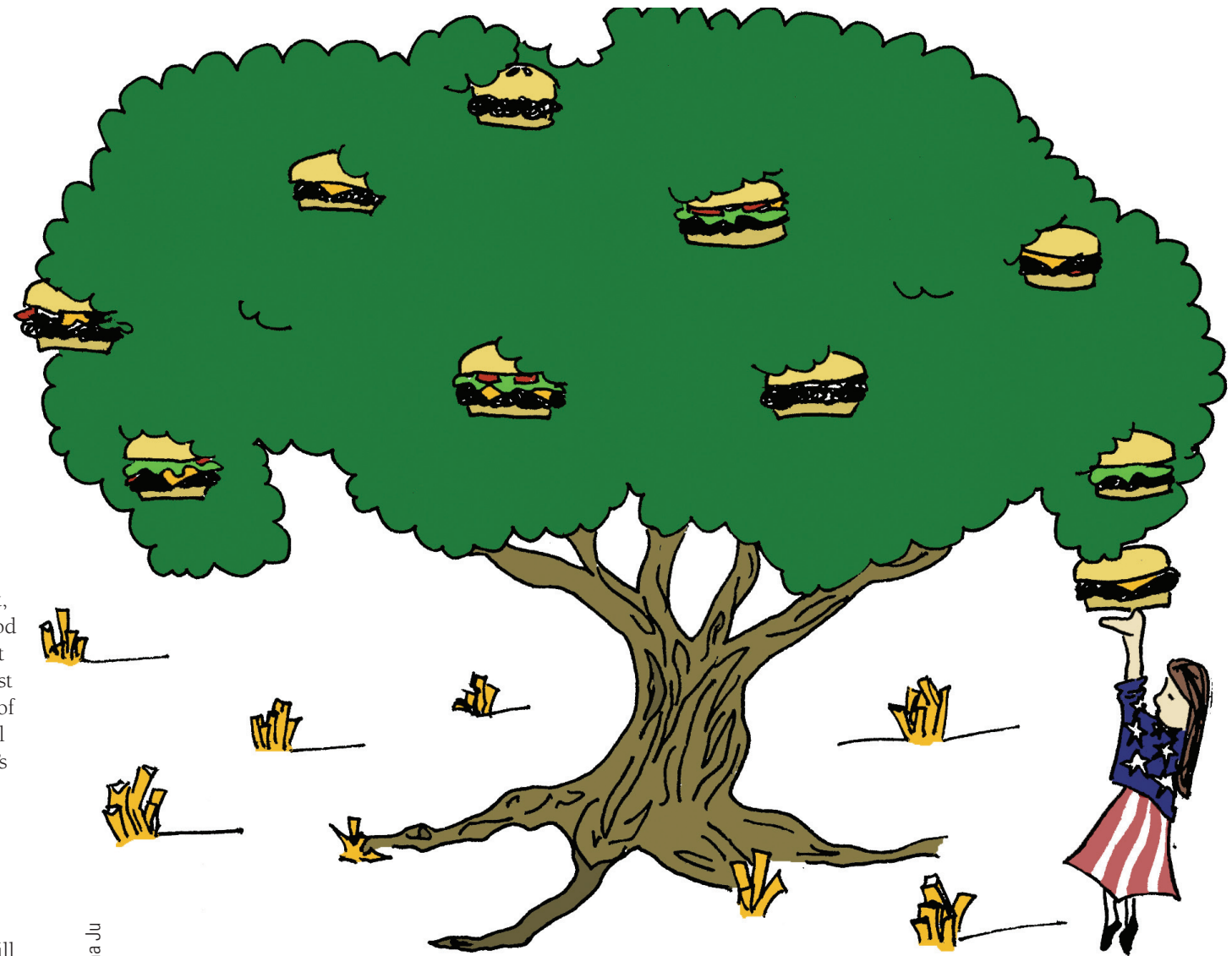


Illustration by Helena Ju

have cookies on the menu. So there are definitely things that some people would consider unhealthy.

"What we're offering is feel-good fast food that's better for you than what's out there in a lot of places today. You'll feel good when you eat it, because it tastes delicious; you'll feel good in the experience, because the environment will be comfortable. The people will be really great—their values will be aligned with those of the business. And you'll feel good after you eat it, because the portions won't be too big. You're not going to feel guilty."

Eat fast food without feeling guilty? Sounds like the holy grail for many of us who can barely keep pace with our own hectic lives. West expects

working women to be her restaurant's evangelists. "Health is an emotional and a physical thing," says West.

Food is certainly an emotional and physical thing too, though, and the relationship seems to work against human nature. That's why designers of everyday objects often compromise function, or what they know to be in a user's best interests, for aesthetics that are based simply on familiarity. Passengers in cars, trains, buses, and airplanes might be safer in rear-facing seats, but people feel more comfortable facing the direction of travel, so forward we go. Humans might live longer on, say, kelp and green tea than on even the healthiest burgers and fries, but not many would stay committed to

such a diet for long—especially with the smell of a ground beef patty frying around the corner.

Innovators pride themselves on embracing change, but often, winning converts requires effecting change without incurring any sense of loss. West's simple plan to feed Americans better burgers reminds designers of the compromises struck between what's best for the people who use their products and what most people really want in their hearts: the same old junk they've already grown to love. 🖐️

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