MSG: The Flavor We Can Do Without

I make no apologies; I'm a food snob. I despise chain restaurants and I'm often suspicious of locally owned versions too. It's from experience, not only from culinary disappointments but as a result of MSG illness in my family, just one too many times.

Is it too much to ask that my meal be enjoyable not only while seated, but hours after when my taste buds have long forgotten the experience? No doubt, MSG is the offender contributing to my prejudice.

A Japanese scientist created the chemical brew, MSG, to imitate the flavor-enhancing abilities of seaweed. In 1969, "Chinese Restaurant Syndrome" defined the MSG phenomenon of neurological disorders.

This concoction is not only creeping into our meals but it's doing so in a veiled way. Hidden from plain sight, its best to check out this list *nom de plume,* of counterfeit names associated with it.

Too much MSG can cause headaches, neurological disruptions, and even obesity. Here are more MSG dangers.

Once, my father had an alarming reaction to MSG, resulting in severe heart palpitations. After that, we spoke to the chef wherever we dined. Time and again we learned that most chefs had no idea what ingredients lurk in their pre-made sauces, mixes and spices.

Further, I met with the head cook at our son's school, and found that the advertised "homemade" soup was actually a dried soup mix with some canned vegetables tossed in. As he and I examined each can and package, nearly every product in the

school pantry listed MSG or it's pseudo name.

So I decided that a little investigating and realigning restaurant and cafeteria allegiances might be in order. Further, I learned that I can get around the MSG impasse with a little planning.

My foremost method is the most obvious. I make meals at home, using fresh ingredients instead of pre-made. It's the only way to insure I have full control, hence the best quality.

However, when I *must* eat out, it generally means skipping chain restaurants and patronizing the locally owned, upscale ones. 'Better atmosphere too, I might add.

Alas, sometimes I *have* to eat at a mediocre restaurant. So, I've devised a few strategies.

First, I order the simplest dish possible: poached eggs, lamb, grilled wild fish or salad without dressing. Marinades are out and I opt for sautés in butter and grilled. I inform the server that I want no "salts", "seasonings" or "spices".

A word of caution about the word "butter"- it's often a term bantered 'round by chain restaurants to mean butter-*like* concoctions. As my teenage son would say,"eeeew!"

I carry a little salt dispenser in my purse. It's quite pretty, actually, resembling a decorative lipstick tube. And if I know in advance that I'll be going to a second-rate restaurant, I toss a small jar of my homemade salad dressing in too. Tiny containers are key from looking conspicuous or offensive.

When my children were small, I'd also transport a bag of crispy nuts or better yet, my own homemade mouse mounds made of coconut oil, raw cacao powder and honey. This not only ensured that they were well nourished, but their appetites were satiated *before* the meal was served. No room for box-mix

cake when you’ve snacked on homemade coconut candies!

So, now when my stomach is growling, I visit my pantry, either my kitchen or the mobile, purse version. If I could install a refrigerator compartment in my Dooney Burke, I’d consider carting butter. All this to avoid MSG? I know. I question all this effort too, sometimes. Perhaps the reason for my irregular behavior has to do with the disappointment of having visited the wrong pantry once too often!