

Picky Eater: Chowder Chow Down

By Jolene Thym
For the Bay Area News Group

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Never in my life would I have imagined eating 13 versions of clam chowder in a single sitting. But I did it for you, dear reader, and invited two very patient, long-suffering friends to slurp alongside. I promise to send thank-you notes next week.

The chowders were warmed, poured into cups and numbered for a blind tasting. But even before the first sip, I knew that this was going to be an interesting battle. Chowders vary in clam-iciousness, from thick and creamy to brothy and chunky. Add in texture, flavor and calorie counts and there's plenty of variation.

The surprise was that while I had to wade through plenty of bad chowder, pinpointing the good ones was very straightforward. Some I liked so much, I'd buy them by the case. A few would be fine doctored with herbs, milk and perhaps a drizzle of lemon olive oil. Others were a total miss. Here's the scoop.

Bar Harbor New England Style Clam Chowder: At \$4.79 at Raleys, the price tag is higher than most, but this can of concentrated soup has an ocean-fresh flavor that beats out every other brand. When I made it with nonfat rather than regular milk to shave calories, it was a bit thin, but still flavorful. It's 150 calories per 2/3 cup serving, not including added milk or cream; 720 mg sodium. H H H H

Campbell's Chunky New England: You can pay considerably more for a bowl of chowder, but

honestly, this one (\$2.79) delivers plenty of clams, nice

chunks of potato and a nice -- if slightly too creamy -- consistency. It has 230 calories per cup; 890 mg sodium. H H H ½

Safeway's Hearty New England: Score! I was so surprised to find this creamy, clam-filled, affordable soup (\$2). It's a bit cream-forward, but perfect with a splash of milk or water to thin it down. It's 200 calories per cup; 890 mg sodium. H H H

Raley's Fine Foods Chunky New England: I suspect supermarket companies have spies. This is so similar to Safeway's version that if it wasn't a side-by-side tasting, I might have confused the two. The Raley's version (\$2.69) has lots of cream and fresh potato flavor. It's just a touch clam-deficient. It has 180 calories per cup; 890 mg. sodium. H H H

Progresso Rich & Hearty New England: This soup (\$2.79) isn't perfect, but it's a pretty decent bowl: creamy, with nice chunks of potato and chewy bits of clam. The consistency is a bit heavy, but that can be adjusted. Adding milk is best, but water will do the job just fine. It has 180 calories per cup; 860 mg sodium. H H ½

Bear Creek Clam Chowder Clam-Flavored Soup Mix: For the non-gourmet with a penchant for Top Ramen -- or the camping enthusiast -- this powdered, add-your-own-clams mix will do just fine. The aroma is a dead-ringer for chicken ramen, but the overall flavor and texture is a lot more pleasing than many canned versions. A cup has 180 calories; 790 mg sodium. Find it for \$3.99 at Raley's and its sister stores; don't forget to add the cost of a 6.5-ounce can of clams. H H ½

Raley's Fresh Deli Fisherman's Wharf Clam Chowder: I love the big chunks of fresh clams and the nice

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chunks of potato, but this soup has a distinctively sweet backdrop that some tasters find unappealing. It's \$4.99 per quart in the deli section. H H

Snow's Bumble Bee New England Clam Chowder: I'd read such great things about this brand of condensed soup (\$2.29 at Safeway) that I was looking forward to tasting it. But I didn't like the garlicky, canned flavor. It has 160 calories per cup; 670 mg sodium. H H

Safeway's Homestyle New England Style: With 10 extra calories per serving, this "homestyle" version (\$2) isn't nearly as pleasing as its "hearty" cousin. It's just as creamy, but it has a pronounced chicken flavor that seems out of place. It's 210 calories per cup; 850 mg. sodium. H

Unworthy of the dinner table: Alas, several chowders were barely edible bowls of disappointment. One evoked the aroma of cat food; another bore an unsettling resemblance to dishwater. Among the chowders on my "do not sip" list: Progresso Light New England Clam Chowder, Pilgrim Joe's Clam Chowder Made with Fresh Clams, Campbell's Chunky Healthy Request New England Clam Chowder and Campbell's Select Harvest 98 percent Fat Free New England Clam Chowder. Just back away from the bowl.

Samples of some of the products reviewed in this column are provided by manufacturers. Contact Jolene Thym at timespicky eater@gmail.com. Read more Picky Eater at www.thepicky eateronline.com.

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