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Oil makes grade on fries

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While Wendy's, Taco Bell and KFC each has announced a switch to new cooking oils free of heart-clogging trans fats, McDonald's Corp. stood by. Until now.

After testing 18 varieties of oil in more than 50 blends during the last seven years, McDonald's told the Tribune last week that it finally struck gold. It found a suitable trans-fat-free oil that won't change the taste or texture of its top-selling menu item: french fries.

Already, McDonald's says it is supplying about 1,200 of its American restaurants with the new oil after starting to secretly test it last summer. By early 2008 in the U.S., the golden arches plans to be cooking all its fries, as well as chicken nuggets and other fried items, in the vegetable oil blend that doesn't have the same unhealthy effects of trans fat.

McDonald's decision to jettison trans fats represents a late but significant move. As obesity rates have risen, the fast-food industry has come under pressure from health and nutrition advocates, consumers and governments to change its menu offerings. McDonald's being the largest and best-known purveyor of burgers and fries, it has taken the most heat.

After an embarrassing retreat from a 2002 announcement that it would soon eliminate trans fats from menu items, McDonald's used the time in a methodical and deliberate search for a new oil. The Oak Brook-based hamburger giant feared a quick solution that tampered with the taste of the fries could have catastrophic consequences for the chain.

"We don't want to jeopardize the iconic nature of the french fry, which is so important to our brand," Jim Skinner, McDonald's chief executive, said at a recent investor conference. "Yet we have a responsibility to serve the best french fry...that balances value and nutrition."

McDonald's executives, citing customer reaction in test markets, say that fries cooked in the new oil remain true to their traditional taste, appearance, texture and aftertaste. "Our customers don't want better," said Barbara Booth, director of the sensory science laboratory for McDonald's. "They want the same." Booth said she believes the fries prepared in the new oil taste the same as the ones that have been sold by the chain since it opened its first hamburger stand in 1955 in Des Plaines.

A few of the company's executives aren't so sure. But Kevin Cook, senior vice president for U.S. restaurant systems, says he accepts the reaction from customers who have tried the new fry at 1,200 restaurants using the oil on a daily basis.

Field tests of the oil have been ongoing in several markets, including Phoenix, since last summer. In feedback sessions customers repeatedly told McDonald's that they can't discern a difference, according to Cook.

The current tests, which Cook said are now complete, were the fourth time the company field-tested a substitute oil since the ill-fated announcement that it would introduce the new oil within six months. Three other oils failed for various reasons. Some clogged cooking filters, others failed to produce a quality fry that could hold up as it cooled.

McDonald's first started looking at trans-fat-free oil in 1999, asking for help from Minneapolis-based Cargill Inc. Cargill led the scientific blending and testing of oils, while McDonald's did extensive tests on how it cooked and tasted. Neither firm would say how much money was spent developing the new oil.

Cook, who has overseen efforts to develop the new oil from the beginning, said the time and effort have paid off. "I still can't get it right" he said about his performance in blind taste tests that require him to distinguish fries cooked with the new oil from those made with the current oil.

But even with the formula in hand, replacing the millions of pounds of trans fat-laden hydrogenated vegetable oil used each year by McDonald's isn't going to be easy.

The company's 13,700 U.S. restaurants along use more than 75 million pounds of oil each year to prepare the chain's french fries, chicken McNuggets, chicken strips, and fish fillets. And McDonald's U.S. restaurants aren't the only ones switching oils.

The chain's 740 Australian outlets already have switched to a blend of canola oil and sunflower oil. McDonald's Australia estimated its switch made last November would remove 415 tons of trans fats from the Australian food supply.

McDonald's 6,300 European restaurants will switch to one of three different canola oil blends later this year or early next year. The first countries to use the new oil there will be Sweden, Norway and Finland.

The new U.S. oil, a blend of canola and soybean oils created by Cargill solely for McDonald's is different than other oils the restaurant chain has tested. Not only did it produce a "slightly crisp," "light golden brown fry" after frying for exactly 3 minutes and 10 seconds, it gave the fry "a fresh baked potato" texture, which is key, Cook said.

The oil will have to pass scrutiny with others regarding its fat content. Cook said he is sure some entity, such as Consumer Reports, will test the new oil as soon as it is available. The magazine did just that last September, after Wendy's announced it had switched oils, and reported that Wendy's fries were not trans-fat-free. Wendy's, however, said it stood by its tests.

It is only the fourth oil McDonald's has allowed to touch its fries in its more than 50-year history.

In 1989, McDonald's switched from beef tallow to solid vegetable shortening after pressure from an Omaha executive who launched a nationwide campaign against heart-threatening food. In 1992, the company switched again to what it and the rest of the nation's food industry thought was going to be a healthier product—partially hydrogenated vegetable oil.

Instead of being healthier, however, the partially hydrogenated vegetable oil turned out to be a ticking bomb. Researchers at Harvard University found that the trans fat created by the hydrogenation process clogged the arteries of people who consumed foods made with the product.

The researchers estimated that 30,000 Americans die each year because of the fats. Recent research suggests trans fat may also contribute to Type II diabetes.

In 2002, The Food and Drug Administration gave packaged food processors until 2006 to remove the offending trans fats or list the amount of trans fats on their labels. Now restaurants are facing similar pressure. New York City has given chain restaurants such as McDonald's until July 1 to switch oils. Chicago is considering its own trans fat ban.

Skinner has said the chain will comply with New York's deadline but other chains, such as Burger King have yet to announce a substitute. Complicating McDonald's effort is the fact that there is a limited supply of the special high-oleic-acid canola and soybean seeds needed for the oil.

"There is a lot of demand out there for a relatively small amount of certain products," said Robert Reeves, president of the Institute of Shortening and Edible Oils in Washington.

And because of McDonald's size, "they have to have a large amount of readily available, consistent supplies," he said, noting some U.S. farmers have been seeking higher payments from oil producers to make the switch.

Ram Reddy, vice president and general manager for Cargill's Naperville office, said the company began signing contracts with farmers last spring. But it must secure more contracts from farmers in the United States, Canada and South America to ensure the supply needed by McDonald's would be consistently available.

"We really needed 18 months to 24 months advance lead time to ensure we have enough" for McDonald's U.S. restaurants said Reddy, who has been at the front line of developing oils for McDonald's since 1987.

Cargill has enough oil on hand to handle McDonald's rollout, Reddy said, but the agriculture giant will rely heavily on new supplies becoming available this fall when farmers begin harvesting their canola and soybean crops; any problem in the fields could limit availability.

The new oil contains attributes most foodmakers have known about for some time but not sought, he said, noting that high-oleic acid "decreases bad cholesterol and increases the good cholesterol."

"We're not going to turn the trench fry into a health food, but it is going to be healthier," Reddy said.

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Sniffs, snaps, some bites; and then they were gone

I would never term myself a french-fry connoisseur, but it used to be difficult for me to pass a McDonald's restaurant at lunch without at least ordering some fries.

In recent years, however, health concerns forced me to cut back on my fast-food excursions. Therefore it was with more than a little anticipation that I looked forward to the taste test of McDonalds' signature product cooked in its new trans fat-free oil.

At the McDonald's quality control laboratory, tucked inside the company's sprawling Oak Brook headquarters, shiny stainless steel was the norm for the counters, chairs, fryers and cabinets.

Lab-coated technicians wasted no time once I was seated. They quickly dropped the frozen fries, which are partially cooked before delivery to McDonald's restaurants, in the new oil for their final cooking.

Exactly 3 minutes and 10 seconds later, the basket came up and a large order of fries was prepared for me to taste.

When served, the color of the fries was between 0 and 1 on the Food and Drug Administration french fry scale—just where the existing fry can be found.

It snapped in half just like the existing fry. And, just like the current fry, its contents appeared mealy like a baked potato.

But then came the most important test. How did the fries taste?

Well, let's just say that in less than five minutes my large serving was gone. And to the non-sophisticated taste buds of this scribe, who headed to a nearby McDonald's to obtain a comparison order, the new fries tasted the same as the current ones.