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THE SHAPE WE'RE IN

Moving Meals Out of the Fast Lane

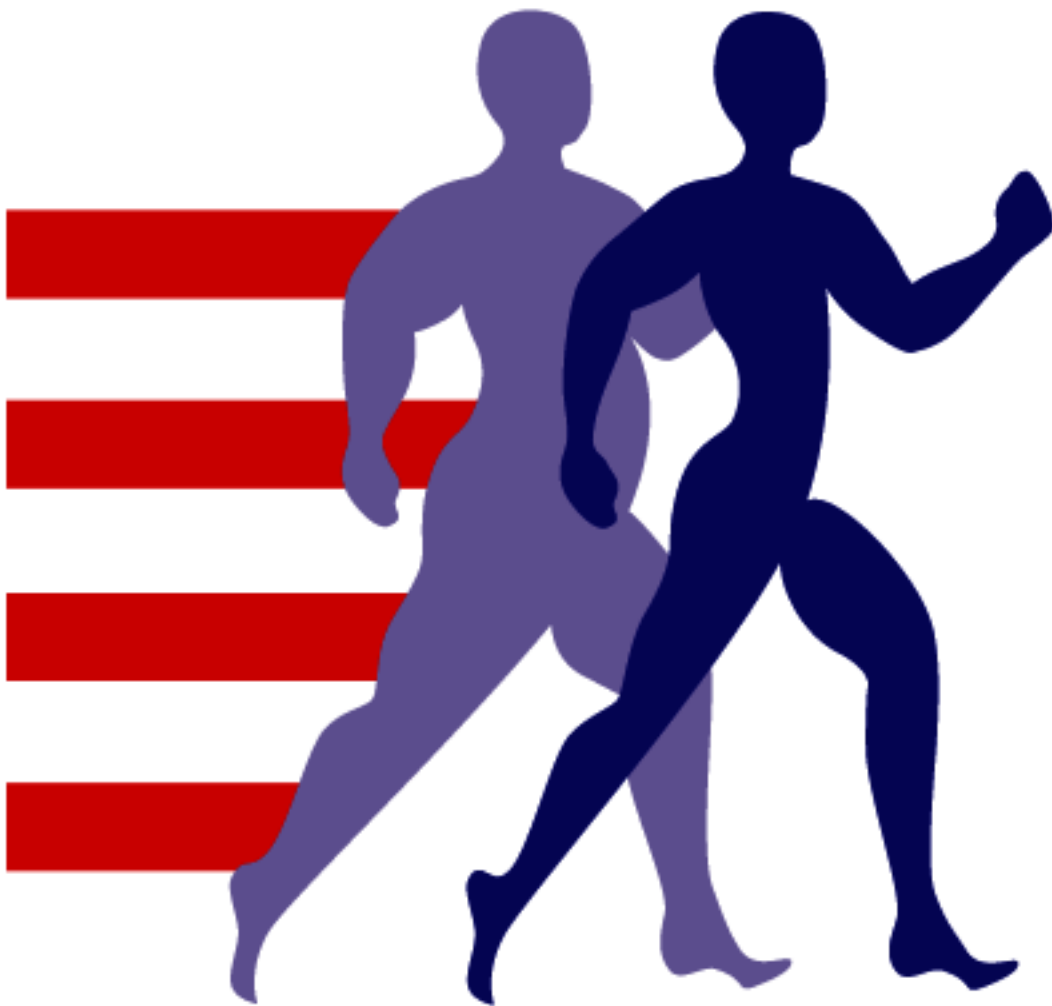




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"The Shape We're In" was produced with the support of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services. The five-part newspaper series was designed to focus a spotlight on America's obesity crisis.

THE SHAPE WE'RE IN

Fast-forward: What Will the McMenu of the Future Look Like?

By Patrick May, San Jose Mercury News

America's love affair with fast food has hit a rocky patch.

There is litigation in the air. Nutritionists warn us about trans-fats and super-sizing our way to obesity. Something is not right in the drive-thru, our transport to a half-century of low-cost, high-calorie, turned-on-a-dime comfort food.

As Americans get fatter, and critics look for culprits among peddlers of cheeseburgers and chicken fingers, the nation may be about to engage in an epic culinary transformation.

What is the future of fast food? Will our passion for french fries fade as we learn to eat smarter? Will the chains reinvent themselves through menus that an increasingly health-conscious public can live with? Or will we continue to spend more than \$110 billion a year on food that health experts say is slowly killing us?

"People who eat fast food tend to have the high-fat and low-fiber diets we associate with obesity," says Gail Woodward-Lopez, associate director of the Center for Weight and Health at the University of California at Berkeley. "We're not asking anyone in the fast-food industry to go out of business. But serving nutritious foods must be given a priority in our culture, just like providing — safe buildings." Saddled with slumping sales and worried by the prospect of obesity lawsuits and more government regulation, the industry suddenly finds itself on the defensive. With its dismal record of developing healthy alternatives to burgers and fries — remember the McLean Burger and Taco Bell's low-calorie Border Lights line? — the large chains wonder: Do we stick with the Big Macs and Whoppers that got us where we are, or do we beef up our menus with healthier selections our core customers may not even want?

"Americans feel they can make their own decisions on what they should be eating, and they don't want the federal government or anyone else telling them what to eat," says Steven Anderson, president of the 300,000-member National Restaurant Association, which often serves as the mouthpiece of the fast-food chains. "We are driven by customer demand. In 2003, we'll serve more than 53 billion meals at all restaurants, which means there is no industry that has its finger on the pulse of 280 million Americans like we do. We see them every day and we know what they want."

So what will Americans want to see on the McMenu of the future? Most new items are in development for as much as two years, so any real change will be gradual. And no one is predicting the demise of fast food, which food writer Claire Hope Cummings calls an American "addiction, built deep into our psyche and lifestyles." Still, there are signs that a modest makeover may be on its way.

Last year, Burger King unveiled the BK Veggie Burger, the first major non-meat offering in the company's history. There's even brown rice in the patty. McDonald's is switching to cooking oil that reduces saturated fats and trans-fatty acids, it says, without sacrificing taste. And Wendy's

has rolled out a new line of salads like the Mandarin Chicken and the Chicken BLT, each with packets of optional ingredients to give the customer the ability to custom-fit the amount of fat and calories.

For now, "let the customer decide" remains the fast-food mantra. And even though they vow to keep experimenting with new items, healthy menu items are a hard sell. Take Burger King. Spokeswoman Kim Miller says the company first market-tested veggie burgers in the late 1980s, only to abandon the effort after they bombed at the counter. In the early 1990s, they tried teaming up with Weight Watchers to offer frozen meals, "but they didn't do well. Consumers told us, 'We're coming to Burger King to eat burgers,' so we ended up pulling that out of our restaurants, too."

But times have changed. More and more households have things like packaged veggie burgers in their freezers. Some trends suggest a restlessness with the holy trinity of burger, fries and soda that has long been the industry's mainstay.

"Six or seven years ago, I went to a conference and McDonald's was test-marketing those little packages of carrots," said Alice Ammerman, associate professor at University of North Carolina's department of nutrition. "My assumption is that the carrots bombed, but that was before they had become popular in stores. Something like that, reintroduced, may now stand a better chance of succeeding."

At Burger King, more people are ordering their Whoppers without buns. Women in particular were substituting BBQ sauce for mayonnaise. "So we did focus groups on a bunch of items and asked, 'What would you buy?'" Miller said. "They said they wanted more choices beyond sandwiches. So we rolled out chili last year for the first time. At 400 calories, it's relatively low-calorie and it's a huge hit."

Not everyone is impressed with the industry's efforts to freshen up, which Ammerman calls "window dressing." And the argument that they're just giving diners what they want is passing the buck, according to critics like Margo Wootan at the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Most fast-food diners, she says, have no idea what they're actually eating or specifically how large portions may contribute to obesity. Wootan suggests restaurants "put calorie labeling up on the menu boards. McDonald's has a nutritional brochure you have to get out of line to even find and you need a magnifying glass to read it."

Even if fast-food chains do offer healthier items, they still must deal with the critics' top complaint — super-sizing, or offering a lot more of an item for a minimal increase in price. Since industry's biggest cost is labor, that extra few cents is nearly pure profit. So while doing things like using healthier oils is a step in the right direction, it doesn't solve the problem of what nutritionist Ammerman calls "the hugeness of everything" in today's fast food.

Ammerman says super-sizing takes advantage of "low-income people because it's presented in a way that makes it hard to resist. You get much more food for a little money, but you also get huge amounts of fat in the process."

She said one of her students estimated that by super-sizing three meals a week, just the additional calories would potentially lead to a weight gain of 16 pounds a year.

The industry rejects the notion that America is super-sizing its way to obesity. McDonald's says only one in 20 of its extra-value meals involves a super-sized item. And Anderson of the National Restaurant Association says "those who do order a super-sized portion often share it among several people. If you don't want the super-size, have the slim size, have the Diet Coke; people are trying to blame obesity on portion size."

That sort of standoff between industry and critics does not bode well for healthier fast foods in the future. Some nutritionists worry that fast food and healthy food may, in fact, be mutually exclusive. Marion Nestle, author of "Food Politics" and professor and chair of the department of nutrition and food studies at New York University, says, "The whole point about fast food is to get people to eat in a hurry, while our advice to avoid obesity is to eat more slowly. So there is an inherent contradiction there."

The big challenge, as marketing futurist Faith Popcorn put it, "is trying to provide a good diet that is cool and hip as well as healthy."

"The fast-food industry can take ownership of the problem and get ahead of the curve," Popcorn says. "Get parents and kids and nutritionists together in a room and find ways to become known as the 'good fast-food company.'"

Harry Balzar, a national expert on Americans' eating habits, predicts a smaller burger designed specifically for women, as well as more fruit on the fast-food menu. Others say flat breads and healthier chicken items will pop up, too. Meanwhile, fast-food chains will continue to manipulate the menus they have already by simply adding new and perhaps healthier condiments to slather on your cheeseburger.

For Lanette Kovachi, Subway's chief nutritionist, the future looks like this: "We'll continue to offer lower-calorie condiments and more gourmet breads, as well as so-called functional foods, or foods that have health benefits outside of basic nutrition. Fiber, for example, decreases cholesterol and tomatoes are rich in lycopene, which reduces the risk of prostate cancer."

Change, she says, is coming. "With everything in the press about obesity, you'll start to see the pendulum swing and people will demand better options. Most fast-food chains offer one or two healthier items, but they must compete with the high-fat items. And there will always be a demand for traditional high-fat foods. The fat tastes good, the salt tastes good. The food's easy to chew, you can eat it fast, and it's cheap."

Wendy's, which introduced salad bars at its outlets in 1979, prides itself on keeping pace with consumers looking for fresh alternatives to deep-fried and salty foods. "We realize people today are more well-traveled and enjoy foods that blend different cultures," says spokesman Bob Bertini. "They're willing to experiment with new ingredients and they're seeking taste excitement, new flavors and textures. Today we're offering things like Asiago cheese, which you wouldn't have heard of 10 years ago at a fast-food restaurant."

Healthier fast food is even coming from McDonald's, which claims 42 percent of the market, although not necessarily through the golden arches. Four years ago, the chain became a major investor in Denver-based chain Chipotle Mexican Grill, known for its fresh handmade burritos. Chipotle serves free-range pork from Niman Ranches, which supplies America's top restaurants with quality meats raised on family farms. McDonald's' involvement with Chipotle, says Bill Niman, is an indication that fast food will gradually reflect America's healthier eating habits.

"McDonald's' own brand is stale and the market is saturated and they can't expand their franchise," says Niman, who says cheeseburgers and fries are simply the tip of the iceberg in a sprawling and environmentally disastrous system of mechanized, mass-produced food. "We're excited to be working with a huge organization like McDonald's," says Niman, "because without them signing on there is no hope of ever changing the system."

Dr. William Dietz of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention envisions another partnership to help make nutrition part of the fast-food recipe.

"I'd love to see more fruit and vegetables and low-fat milk at fast-food places," Dietz said, "but people don't think about eating healthy things when they're out. Why? Because 'they're out.'

"We'd love to learn more about why that is. We in public health need to find ways to support the fast-food industry as they offer new, healthier alternatives."



Trade in Those Burgers and Fries? Not So Fast

Like millions of Americans, Bob Beliles and his family routinely head for the local fast-food joint when they're looking for a convenient way to eat out without spending a lot of time or money.

On these almost weekly outings, their table is normally covered with the typical — and fat-filled — fare this fast-food nation was raised on: juicy cheeseburgers and thick shakes, chicken nuggets with a rich dipping sauce, Cokes and ice cream, all stacked around that monolith of on-the-go dining — the super-sized carton of french fries.

The Beliles, a family of four living in the San Francisco Bay area, were asked recently to think outside the burger-and-fries box and order lunch with less fat and salt than normal.

Results were mixed. In fact, based on the Beliles' experience, the fast-food chains might want to rethink some of the selections they're putting in front of customers these days.

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At the neighborhood Burger King one Sunday afternoon in March, Ryan Beliles, 10, considers the meal before him. Normally, he'd automatically order eight Chicken Tenders with Ranch dip, medium fries (salted, with ketchup), and a medium chocolate shake (1,340 calories). Today, it's a Chicken Whopper (330 calories), and a low-fat milk (110 calories).

"I bet this won't be very good," he says with a scowl. After a few bites of the sandwich, which he agreed to order without any sauce, Ryan cheers up a bit. "It's good," he says. "The chicken is kind of juicy. And I don't miss the mayonnaise at all."

His sister, Katie, 7, is biting into a BK Veggie Burger (360 calories) she has ordered for the first time in her life. She'll wash it down with low-fat milk. Unfortunately, there won't be much to wash down, since Katie barely finishes half the sandwich. Instead, she's dreaming of what she usually asks for: A Kids Meal with a cheeseburger, regular fries and a shake (770 calories).

"This tastes OK, but it has no cheese," says Katie, underwhelmed by Burger King's latest attempt at a healthy menu item. Bob, 39, orders a side salad with low-fat Italian dressing (50 calories) and iced tea. Ordinarily, he would have a Double Whopper with cheese (1,120 calories), Up-Sized fries (600 calories), and a large Diet Coke.

Today, he also tries a BK Veggie Burger and, like Katie, he is disappointed.

"The bummer is you first taste that lettuce and the tomato like you would biting into a hamburger, but then the taste you're expecting from the meat doesn't come," he says. "This is like a slightly warmed-up lettuce-and-tomato sandwich. It doesn't do a good job of tasting like a real burger." His wife, Kristine, 38, is the happiest of the bunch. Instead of her normal Whopper with cheese (795 calories), an Up-Sized fries (600 calories) and a Diet Coke, she is thoroughly enjoying her healthy meal: a Chicken Caesar Salad with dressing (220 calories), a baked potato (310 calories) and a 22-ounce iced tea.

"This is a great salad," says Kristine. "The chicken is moist and the lettuce is fresh." She's cheating, though, by using Creamy Caesar dressing (140 calories) instead of the low-fat Italian alternative (50 calories) she could have asked for.

While their son polishes off his Chicken Whopper, exclaiming "I'd never give this up for a million dollars," Bob is unhappy. "I'm finished with the BK Veggie Burger, but I'm not satisfied," he says. "I miss the french fries."

Katie has finished her milk and left half her BK Veggie Burger in the wrapper. And Kristine digs deep into her baked potato, which she has spruced up with Country Crock, a butter-like substance advertised as a "50 percent vegetable oil spread."

In the end, the Beliles split the difference: two satisfied customers and two emphatic thumbs-down. They eat lunch for about \$2 less than they would have ordering their usual higher-fat meals, ingest 3,235 fewer calories among the four of them, but ultimately question why anyone looking for healthy food would come to a fast-food restaurant in the first place. It's an oxymoron, Kristine says.

"When we go out as a family, we don't think of ordering healthy. This has been a less-than-satisfying experience because you come here expecting to eat a certain kind of food."

Bob agrees. "This is certainly a good way to lose weight, but this meal makes me crabby," he says, pointing out all the huge posters of juicy burgers dripping with melted cheese, food he didn't get to eat this time. "If I want to lose weight, I won't come to a fast-food place because it's torture."

Both believe the fast-food menu of the future probably won't change much. Says Kristine, "If you start replacing traditional items people like with this healthy stuff that just doesn't taste as good, they'll get ticked off."

The Beliles leave Burger King with Bob promising to take the kids to one more place before heading home: a nearby Fosters Freeze for ice-cream sundaes.



Fast Food and Obesity

Percentage of consumers who agree that meals prepared at a restaurant or fast-food establishment are essential to the way they live: 30

Of the 844,000 eateries in the United States, the number serving fast food: 177,000

Percentage of calories Americans consume outside the home: 34

Total fast-food sales projected for 2003, in billions: \$120.9

Percentage of the restaurant-industry share of the food dollar today: 46.1

Percentage in 1955: 25

Percentage of schoolchildren who can identify Ronald McDonald: 96

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Sources: The U.S. Department of Agriculture; the National Restaurant Association; the Center for Science in the Public Interest; "Fast Food Nation," by Eric Schlosser