

Meat Cravers vs. Health Lovers

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“It's essentially an entire meatloaf in between two slices of bread,” Boston College freshman Katie Dean says of Burger King's newest entree - the BK Stacker. The customer can choose to stack two, three, or even four patties with equal slices of cheese and up to eight pieces of bacon with BK's special Stacker Sauce. The “Quad Stacker” monstrosity adds up to 1,000 calories, 68 grams of fat, and 30 grams of saturated fat; a total of almost two days' worth of the recommended intake of saturated fat in just one sitting (Foster).

Waiting for her order at the drive-thru of McDonald's, working mother Leea Osborne exclaims, “It's always been great to be able to grab a quick bite to eat in between work and picking up the kids at school, but now the healthy options make it guilt free!” One of her favorites is the Caesar salad, which amounts to just 90 calories, 4 grams of fat, and 2.4 grams of saturated fat while also providing 3 grams of fiber (“McDonald's Nutrition Facts”).

Fast food has become a part of life in America, just like baseball - they even offer cardboard-boxed apple pie! Taking a short break in between bites of her cheeseburger and sips of her super-thick shake, fast food connoisseur, Beth Davison, recounts her newly instated tradition of taking her son to BK upon the receipt of a good grade. “Timmy just loves those chicken straws!” exclaims Ms. Davison. “And he always gets an ice cream sundae to munch on later when he plays his video games.” Ah, the sweet smell of America's reheated pastimes.

The fast-food industry began as a string of competing burger joints. Many menus of old offered only burgers, French fries, shakes, and Coca Cola, and, as a result of the limited menu, offered inconceivably quick service - hence the phrase “fast food.” The goal of these early restaurants was to function as efficiently as possible, so that food could be offered to the public

at the lowest price possible (“Fast food”). As the market for such food and service grew, the diversity of choices followed suit, but the traditional hamburgers and French fries still dominate the market to this day.

The speedy service industry owes much of its growth and success to its most loyal customers, the “cravers” (Grant). These people are regular patrons of fast-food chain restaurants, and can be seen salivating longingly in the drive-thru line, for even the sweet acquisition of a double cheeseburger is not worth enduring the walk from the parking lot to the restaurant. These are the men and women who order the “King Kong” Triple Whopper or the Bigger Big Mac; the ones who plead to the lifeless speaker system, “Super size me, please!” The entire establishment has been built by catering almost exclusively to the desires of these customers because they are the ones who return day after day. These cravers want larger portions of greasy meals at lower prices. Most chains have recognized this phenomenon and have responded with dollar menus, value meals, and options to upgrade the size of one's meal, all of which have seen overwhelming success.

Meat - “America's No.2 Condiment,” according to the satirical newspaper, *The Onion* - is the one item that produces the majority of fast-food chains' revenue, and there is no doubt that “what [people] want to pile on their hamburger patty is another hamburger patty” (“Report: Meat Now America's No.2 Condiment”). If you are going to eat more than half of your recommended daily caloric intake in one sitting, why not just go all out and add the extra three patties and a side of bacon?

The information is concrete: the cravers' commerce drives the industry. Statistics show that a typical store will sell approximately one to two chicken sandwiches for every six to eight double cheeseburgers, but some restaurants have surprisingly begun to abandon their classic fast

food roots (Warner). Many well-known chains sit on middle ground, however; the two most recognizable chains have gravitated to complete opposite sides of the spectrum, mirroring the growing disparity between the craver culture and those who follow the health craze. While Burger King caters to its most loyal customers with astoundingly large servings, McDonald's attempts to counter the effects of such exposes as *Super Size Me* with a revitalized, health-conscious menu.

McDonald's has caved to political and societal pressures, distancing itself from traditional fast food joints by offering menu items for the more health conscious. The Golden Arches now seem to lead down a V-shaped road of options that are still fast, but now also healthy. The shift began several years ago when the firm announced its new “all white-meat” chicken. In the years since, the restaurant has significantly expanded its repertoire. The backlit artwork now displays salads of all kinds: Asian chicken, apple walnut, and garden, all with low-fat dressing. McDonald's now also offers fruit options, such as the apple dippers. In addition to the salads, the company boasts deli sandwiches, milk, free-range eggs, and fresh lettuce (Clark). Surprisingly, these new options are even pleasing to the die-hard greasy food fans, “Those crispy chicken salads go great with a bacon cheeseburger,” said an excited John Jennings. Also, in a radical departure from typical fast food corporation behavior, the company now includes all nutritional information on its products' packaging, rather than just displaying it in the restaurant on a poster with a slightly obscured view (Horovitz). Even so, questions remain as to the motivations and even the true nutritional value of these so-called “healthy” choices.

The numbers show clearly what drives the fast food economy, so what compels McDonald's to cater to the healthier mind? The executives, such as Bill Lamar, chief marketing officer, might pride themselves on allowing people to “make the decisions about how to eat for

themselves,” but the truth is that the corporation has seen a year of the “new” McDonald's menu bring in one million more customers (Warner). Additionally, the company's changes seem “largely cosmetic,” as “it is selling more burgers and fries than ever” (Clark). How does an attempt to create healthy dining lead to a sales boom in the polar-opposite category?

According to McDonald's chief financial officer Matthew Paul, products like salads “cast a favorable glow over [the] brand and the rest of [the] menu” (Warner). Indeed, since the instatement of these new choices, the world's largest hamburger chain has seen an exponential increase in sales of classic fast foods, while only 10 percent of the total revenue comes from salads and sandwiches (Frith). Though McDonald's philosophy seems incomparably different from that of Burger King, one wonders whether it is driven by a concern for the health of society; or whether it is a clever marketing strategy.

Darren Tristano, an analyst at the food consultancy Technomic, believes that “although there are genuinely healthy options on the menu, they largely serve as a spur to trigger greater sales of traditional McDonald's meals ... salads eliminate the veto vote. If you're in a party of people where one person wants to stay healthy, the new menu allows that person to get what they're looking for, and stops the entire group [of customers from] going somewhere else” (Clark). This hypothesis, that the healthy menu is solely a crafty marketing strategy, is supported by nutritional evidence. Many salads have an unusually high salt or fat content, and are served with regular high-calorie, high-fat dressings, unless one specifically requests low-fat. And the apple dippers? The dip is pure melted caramel.

While McDonald's monopolizes the health-conscious high ground, Burger King proudly caters to its cravers. No apologies offered, the second-leading fast food chain in the country continues to offer larger portions at increasingly lower prices and avoids the realm of pricier,

healthier foods. The firm holds that “its customers are not asking for change in large enough numbers” and “not every customer has a desire for health, wellness and nutrition” (Grant, Goodison). It seems that Burger King has “found its niche” in embracing the traditional fast food mentality, “amping up the calories and fat.” Therefore, the public will continue to see remarkable calorie and fat content in innovations such as the Meat'Normous Omelet Sandwich: three slices of bacon, two slices of ham, a sausage patty, two eggs, and two slices of cheese in a bun, as well as the BK Stacker and the “King Kong” Triple Whopper. BK's “in-your-face, stuff-your-face” approach appeals to customers who crave the meat, the side orders, and the condiments (Goodison). At Burger King, they can certainly “have it their way.”

Although McDonald's receives good press for their apparent part in the fight against obesity, the company's new look could be just a clever marketing ploy. In such a light, Burger King's no-excuses policy seems to be the more respectable approach. The public may never know the true reasons behind McDonald's makeover or Burger King's decision to stay true to fast food traditions, but either way, customers cannot seem to get enough of anything the industry will offer.

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