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Obesity Woes Eating At Fast-Food Chains

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WASHINGTON -- In a move hardly calculated to appeal to the health-conscious, Hardee's restaurants recently scrapped almost its entire menu to focus on hefty sandwiches called Thickburgers--including the Double Bacon Cheese Thickburger, weighing in at two-thirds of a pound and 1,148 calories.

"Only one word can describe it: Thick! Thick! Thick!" a new ad trumpets.

The super-size approach has come under increasing fire from nutrition experts, Wall Street analysts and lawyers concerned about the food industry's role in the nation's obesity epidemic.

But while manufacturers promote "lite," "low cholesterol" or "heart healthy" products, fast-food and casual restaurants are confronted with the reality that their customers still crave sugar and fat. Like Hardee's, many are still relying on a decades-old formula: abundant food at bargain prices.

"They're caught in a cycle that nobody feels like they can get out of," said Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition and food studies at New York University. "If people eat less, it's going to be bad for business. The whole point of the food industry is to get people to eat more, not less."

Said Bob Goldin, executive vice president of Technomic, a food industry consulting firm, "At some point, the industry is going to have to grapple with portion size. The portions are just too big."

The problem is particularly acute for chain restaurants because they are often judged by the quantity of their servings and have prospered by serving cheeseburgers, french fries, pizza and other artery-clogging fare being targeted by nutritionists and

plaintiffs' attorneys.

Threats are expanding

The threats are multiplying: A week after the government required food companies to list trans fat on packaging, some politicians are demanding that the same type of information be displayed in restaurants. A group of lawyers is searching for ways to sue food and restaurant companies for contributing to the nation's obesity crisis, taking a page from lawsuits against tobacco companies.

Some chains have responded by adding salads or low-fat alternatives to their menus, such as Subway's successful campaign featuring seven sandwiches with 6 grams of fat or less. And fast-food chains promising "fresh" fare, such as Baja Fresh, have had some success.

But while some menus have expanded, there has been little movement to scratch fatty foods from restaurant offerings or reduce the portions. If anything, it appears that the selection of big and fatty foods is expanding with the nation's waistline.

Huddle House restaurants tout five Big House sandwiches, along with a "super" portion of fries. The new McDonald's breakfast line, McGriddles, features combinations of eggs, sausage, bacon and cheese sandwiched between two pancakes "with the sweet taste of maple syrup baked right in."

Among the fastest-growing fast-food restaurants are Krispy Kreme Doughnuts and Culver's, a Wisconsin-based chain that specializes in frozen custard, cheese curds and Butter Burgers, which have butter spread across a toasted bun, according to QSR Magazine, which tracks the fast-food industry.

In a recent survey by Sandelman & Associates, nearly two-thirds of respondents believed the quantity and nutritional value of fast food contributed in some way to the nation's obesity problems. At the same time, 47 percent considered larger sizes of french fries and drinks a good value and 53 percent said they purchased super-size products.

With the threat of new regulations and obesity-related lawsuits looming, spokesmen for several food companies were reluctant to tout their super-size offerings and tried to shift the conversation to healthier fare.

Denny's spokeswoman Debbie Atkins said that the chain introduced a Fit Fare line about 10 years ago. But when asked, she confirmed that the Original Grand Slam breakfast was the chain's top seller.

Wendy's spokesman Bob Bertini said the company has been an industry leader in offering salads since 1979. Asked about its trademark Biggie menu items, he said, "For customers who want larger sizes, we have them."

Hardee's referred calls to company lawyer Robert Wilson, who said, "There's no secret that our line of products was not designed to be diet food." The long-term plan, he said, is to add healthy alternatives.

McDonald's on Monday reported a sales increase that analysts attributed, in part, to its salads--and McGriddles.

From jumbo to super-size

The success of super-size, high-calorie food is due in part to the economics of the food business and the gumption of a few entrepreneurs.

In his new book "Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People on Earth," author Greg Critser says the original idea came from theater executive David Wallerstein, who in the 1960s was struggling to boost popcorn sales.

Wallerstein eventually realized that customers would not buy two bags, even at a discount, because they did not want to appear gluttonous.

Thus was born jumbo-size popcorn, and the super-size revolution had begun.

While Wallerstein took his ideas to McDonald's, Dennis Potts stumbled on to the same concept for 7-11 stores. As a mid-level manager in the 1970s, Potts offered 32-ounce fountain drinks for the same price as a 16-ounce bottle.

"They just went absolutely nuts," said Potts, the now-retired father of the Big Gulp. "The customer wasn't satisfied with the small sizes they were getting."

Larger portions tend to be more profitable because the food is a small percentage of the overall cost; most expenses are for such items as packaging and labor. And fatty high-calorie food outsells healthy fare because it costs less to serve and to buy--and to many people, it tastes better.

"We have this innate preference for sweet, fat things," said Jim Hill, director for the Center for Human Nutrition at the University of Colorado. "And sweet, fat things are the cheapest thing on the planet to produce."

Neil Stern, who tracks the food industry for the consulting firm McMillan/Doolittle, said some companies have succeeded with products that seem to be healthier than they are, from low-fat cookies that are high in sugar to bacon-covered salads slathered in fatty dressing.

"I think the truth on it has historically been that you roll out lower-fat, lighter items and they don't sell as well as higher-fat, better-tasting stuff," Stern said.

It's a lesson that Douglas Sheley knows well.

In the early 1980s, Sheley and his partner, Jeff Miller, unveiled a fast-food chain called D'Lites that offered salads, low-fat cheeses and vegetarian sandwiches. The chain's initial success persuaded its owners to go public and expand at a breakneck pace. By the time the restaurants shut their doors in 1996, there were 104 D'Lites operating.

"I was way head of myself in the mass marketing of it," said Sheley. "I have been thinking lately, I still may resurrect this mother. If I was 20 years younger, I would probably do it."

Until then, Sheley and Miller have plenty to do. Sheley is a Steak n Shake franchisee, while Miller runs a string of Pizza Huts.