



Big Fat Deal

Locals agencies and restaurants target trans fats.

By Kate Howard
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Clean Beans: With encouragement from the county health department's Steps program, La Estrella in Salinas is among the local taquerías that have gone trans-fat free voluntarily.—

Jane Morba

Trans fats slithered into the national limelight last December when New York City famously cracked down on them in all of its 20,000-plus restaurants. Fast food chains, small takeout eateries, and fine restaurants alike are now limited to a half gram of the artery-clogging fat per serving.

Few know that the first city to ban trans fats lies much closer to Monterey County: In 2004, Tiburon, Calif. disallowed trans fats in its 18 restaurants. When NYC wanted to implement a similar ban, they called Tiburon for help.

The state of California is entertaining the idea of its own laws. On June 8, the California State Assembly passed a bill to ban trans fats statewide. The bill must be approved by the State Senate and the Governor to become law. The proposed bill may go into effect as early as 2008.

Trans fatty acid, or trans fat, is formed by chemically processing liquid oil to convert it to a solid fat like margarine or shortening. This is done through hydrogenation—adding hydrogen atoms to unsaturated fats to make them saturated. Some food producers favor trans fats because they have a long shelf life (keeping cookies and crackers fresh), high melting points (cake frosting doesn't drip down the sides at room temperature), and give a creamy texture to cold foods and a crispy texture to deep-fried foods.

Health industry officials know no such affection for the unnatural fat.

"Trans fats and saturated fats are both bad, but trans fats are worse because they lower good cholesterol and raise bad cholesterol, and that's a double whammy," says Allison Miller, a public health nutritionist for the Monterey County Health Department. The "double whammy" increases the risk of coronary heart disease, a killer of more than 500,000 Americans annually.

With this in mind, local groups aren't sitting around stuffing their faces with fried Oreos while they wait for the state law. Steps for a Healthier Salinas, a program of the Monterey County Health Department, has successfully encouraged taquerías in Salinas to convert to trans fat-free menus.

"Many taquerías have customers they see daily, if not twice a day," says Elán Garcia, a chronic disease prevention specialist for Steps. "They are feeding the community and we get them to see that."

Steps' staff helps taquerías by recommending they add healthy dishes to the menu and introducing alternatives like whole wheat tortillas and whole, not refried, beans. Steps also provides educational

handouts and assists in promotional ideas to help create consumer demand.

Steps spokespeople say the advocacy is working: Many taquerías (like La Esteralla Taqueria) have gone trans fat-free voluntarily. When Garcia finds taquerías like Tacos el Jaliciense that already avoid trans fats, she helps them promote their products as healthy.

In kitchens across the county, meanwhile, the anti-trans-fat continues to build through the efforts of chefs who voluntarily eliminate it. Tony Baker, executive chef at Montrio in Monterey, uses pure canola oil in his fryer and he changes the oil daily.

“I’ve firmly believed in that for years,” Baker says. “It’s more expensive—I could buy the hydrogenated oil and make it last for a few days—but I pay less for the [canola] oil and change it more often.”

Wild Plum Cafe and Bakery in Monterey hasn’t used trans fats in its eight years in business. “I’ve been an extremely avid label reader for 10 years,” chef Pamela Burns says. “Anything that has a hydrogenated anything should be immediately returned to the shelf. That’s kind of harsh, but it’s my rule of thumb.”

Though local restaurants are beginning to eliminate trans fats, Susan Stuart, community coordinator for Steps, is still concerned with the big picture.

“Taking trans fats and substituting better oil is good, but you have to focus on other issues as well,” she says. “As far as a ban locally, I don’t know if that will be necessary because we’re already moving in that direction.”

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