The New York Times
nytimes.com

August 12, 2005

High on the Hog

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Boston

WHEN the New York City health department asked restaurants to stop serving food containing trans fats this week, it aroused anxiety in some diners but joyful anticipation in me. The stage might be set at last for the comeback of the great misunderstood fat: lard.

Every baker knows that despite lard's heavy reputation (it is pig fat, after all), nothing makes a flakier or better-tasting pie crust. Lard also makes the lightest and tastiest fried chicken: buttermilk, secret spices and ancient cast-iron skillets are all well and good, but the key to fried chicken greatness is lard.

Dainty eaters who pay dearly for prosciutto but leave the ivory-colored ribbon of fat on the plate infuriate Italians, who know that's where the flavor and succulence are. Italian food lovers now live for the recently revived lardo - salt-and-pepper-cured fatback, heaven on bread.

In the United States though, lard has long been demonized. Whenever I enter a bakery (and I enter every one I find), I ask if anything is made with lard. Even in Mexican and Latin American bakeries with Spanish-spoken-only signs, where the bakers surely know that in their native countries the most savory empanadas and the airiest tamales rely on lard, my hopes are usually dashed.

I recently got lucky at the wonderfully antiquated LeJeune's Bakery in Jeanerette, La. LeJeune's is famous for its French bread, which in Louisiana means a puffy white loaf particularly suited to muffalettas - the Louisiana version of the hero sandwich whose bread is soaked with olive salad and layered with provolone and meats like salami and ham. I wasn't surprised to hear the secret of LeJeune's exceptional flavor and soft but pliant crumb, but I was delighted: lard. The baker proudly led me to a tub of golden lard he had bought from the farm down the road. I was looking at a tub of joy.

But when I went deeper into Cajun country, to bakeries down the highway from LeJeune's, or asked at restaurants where cooks once swore by lard for the lightest biscuits and fried catfish, I was met with the same misbegotten pride: "We only use vegetable fat, it's so much healthier."

Vegetable shortening, of course, tastes like greasy nothing. And there is ample evidence, as the city health department knows, that it is anything but good for you. Vegetable shortening (vegetable oil that is partially hydrogenated to make it solid - the "trans" in "trans fat") did seem like a miracle in the early days of industrialized food. Indeed, early in my mother's marriage when she spent a month making a pie a day to perfect her crust-making skills, she used the fat she grew up on: Crisco, developed by industry to mimic the virtues of lard but relieve housewives of the burden of rendering their own fat. It was useful not just to kosher-keeping cooks like my mother but to city dwellers, who lived far from a reliable source of lard (any Italian cook will still tell you that the only trustworthy lard comes from a pig you know). Crisco could be used solid for baking, or melted for frying. It didn't need refrigeration, and it was inexpensive.

Then came the damning conclusions of the first long-range studies of the national postwar epidemic of heart disease, and the countrywide fear of saturated fats. Butter, cream and egg yolks were the first to go, to the heartbreak of cooks just learning the glories of French cuisine, and lard soon followed. Besides, lard seemed old-fashioned - redolent of poverty and its companion cuisines.

Now trans fats are considered the devil, and vegetable shortening is worse than butter could ever dream of being. After prodding by nutrition advocates, the Food and Drug Administration has taken the stand that there is no healthy level of trans fat in the diet, and as of January will require manufacturers to state the presence of trans fats on every food label. Now comes the call from Dr. Thomas R. Frieden, New York's health commissioner, for restaurants to "voluntarily make an oil change and remove artificial trans fat from their kitchens." What are beleaguered manufacturers and cooks to do? The loss of trans fats makes things tough. It makes pastry tough too.

I have a suggestion for those Old World cooks who are wrestling with New World advice: take another look at the fat profile of lard. It has half the level of saturated fat of palm kernel oil (about 80 percent saturated fat) or coconut oil (about 85 percent) and its approximately 40 percent saturated fat is lower than butter's nearly 60 percent. Today's miracle, olive oil, is much lower in saturated fat, as everyone knows, but it does have some: about 13 percent. As for monounsaturated fat, the current savior, olive oil contains a saintly 74 percent, yes. But scorned lard contains a very respectable 45 percent monounsaturated fat - double butter's paltry 23 or so percent.

As with all dietary advice, the fat of the day will change. But eternal truths will remain: food is always best with little or no processing and eaten as close as possible to where it is grown. This goes for lard, too. The artisan pig farmers whose fortunes have been revived by a new market for pork with real flavor should look into selling lard because the supermarket kind is processed and dismal. And Dr. Frieden's request may produce a burgeoning metropolitan market.

The health department is suggesting alternative oils including olive oil and neutral oils like peanut, sunflower and cottonseed. Olive oil is a true gift of nature, of course, and good for anything on a grill or from the garden. But when it comes to cherry pie or fried chicken or French fries, excessive reliance on these oils has the potential to clear both arteries and restaurants. Chefs and short-order cooks can do everyone a favor - even the guardians of the public health - by reaching for the fat that everyone knows tastes the best: lard.

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