

'Natural' Foods: Actually Traditional, Not Trendy

Ernest R. Miller

Along with authenticity, one of the biggest trends in our industry is the shift toward “natural” foods. In 2015, the Nielsen Global Health and Wellness Survey studied the preferences of 30,000 consumers in 60 countries and determined that the most desirable food characteristics are freshness, naturalness and minimal processing. Clean labels featuring natural ingredients are no longer a trend but the presumptive standard.

While what constitutes “natural” for most consumers can be somewhat hazy, there is a clear desire for minimally processed, non-chemically treated ingredients. Consumers want to see ingredients that their grandmother would recognize; they expect their food to be made with traditional recipes and techniques. According to a recent meta study of consumer preferences, “Using traditional food production methods is perceived as preserving the food's natural state.”¹

Natural animal fat shortenings provide an opportunity to take advantage of the clean label movement. With very minor changes or need for reformulation, it is possible to switch from chemically-extracted, highly processed fats to natural animal fats.

Rather than innovate new “natural” products, this is *renovation*; restoring food traditions that date back centuries. The benefits can be substantial, as natural foods are seen to be healthier, fresher, tastier and more eco-friendly.

Enhancing Quality -- Naturally

Of course, in the final analysis, unless you are engaged in an historical recreation, seeking authenticity for authenticity's sake alone, flavor is paramount. If authenticity and tradition do not provide better texture and taste, perhaps we are better off without them.

This, however, is where natural animal fat shortenings shine.

In a recent blind taste test at the 2017 Orange County Fair in Costa Mesa, Calif., more than 120 fairgoers were invited to select which they preferred: French fries fried in beef tallow or those fried in soybean oil. By a vote of 71 to 57, fairgoers chose the beef tallow-fried spuds.

Why were the beef tallow fries superior? A lot of it has to do with texture, one of the most important aspects of flavor. In general, the higher the saturated fat content, the crisper your fried product will be. Tallow, which has one of the highest saturated fat contents of any edible fat, makes for a crispier exterior, whether French fry, taquito or chicken leg.

¹ Román, S., Sánchez-Siles, L. M., & Siegrist, M. (2017). The importance of food naturalness for consumers: Results of a systematic review. *Trends in Food Science & Technology*, 67, 44–57. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.tifs.2017.06.010>

Additionally, with natural animal fat shortenings, there is less absorption of oil and less weeping. Thus, tallow fries taste less greasy.

In addition to texture, deep frying in beef tallow improves the taste. After all, frying fats are not only cooking mediums, but ingredients in the final product. For many, the flavor (or lack thereof) of chemically processed industrial seed oils is all they know. But animal fats bring back the flavor. The reason is that they enhance *umami*.

Animal fats naturally contain the trace amino acids that are the source for the rich, savory flavor of umami. On the other hand, industrially-processed seed oils are deliberately stripped of trace chemicals because any that were allowed to remain would be unpleasant and possibly even toxic. Vegetable oil companies claim this is an advantage, providing a “clean” flavor, but in reality, the resulting product is both bland and artificial.

French fries fried in beef tallow have a certain savoriness, a meatiness, that their seed oil counterparts lack. That is the advantage of umami. It isn't that the fries taste like beef, but that they have a richness other frying oils simply can't deliver. Similarly, fried chicken in beef tallow or lard tastes more meaty -- not beefy or porky, but richer and, actually, more chicken-like.

This flavor advantage applies in baking applications as well. Whether pastry, biscuit, cookie (bizcocho, anyone?), bread or any other baked good, animal fat shortenings provide a richer taste experience than vapid vegetable oil blends that have to undergo extreme processing in order to mimic natural shortenings.

The verdict is in: everyone knows that the best pie crusts are made with animal fat shortenings such as butter, lard or tallow.²

With animal fat shortenings, authentic ingredients naturally make a better product.

Embracing Snout to Tail

Consumers have come to realize that what they eat matters environmentally.³ Sustainability, like the desire for natural ingredients, is no longer a trend but a long-term movement. And customers are looking to your company for leadership. Consumers want to know what efforts the businesses they patronize are making to be more sustainable. As people vote their values with their dollars, sustainable business will be in the very best position to thrive.

Although the snout-to-tail movement has become increasingly popular over the last decade or so, it is not a new way of eating. For most of our history we could not afford to let any part of the animal go to waste, but made use of every bit possible. This more traditional

² Clark, Melissa "Heaven in a Pie Pan: The Perfect Crust" New York Times, 16 Nov. 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/15/dining/15crus.html>.

³ Coast Packing/Ipsos Research Consumer Survey, 26 Jun. 2017.

way of eating not only reduces waste, but is more ethical and gives greater respect to the animal itself.

Because of the switch to seed oils in the 1980s, however, the fat of our animals has not been used in the kitchen as much as it should.

After slaughter, the average cow is about 12 percent what is called “fat trim.” This is what is ground, steamed and centrifuged into beef tallow is. That is a significant amount of the animal, which too many food service businesses are allowing to go to waste. If beef is on the menu, what is the excuse to not cook with its fat?

Moreover, a commitment to food waste reduction and sustainability can underscore the narrative behind your business. Consider: restaurants will frequently highlight the quality of the beef they use in their “100 percent Angus Burgers,” but when was the last time you saw a food service establishment boast on its menu about frying in “The Finest Quality Soybean Oil”? Yet more and more restaurants are proudly touting their use of animal fat shortenings, such as in “Beef Tallow French Fries.”

Reducing Food Costs – and Food Waste

In addition to a being higher quality product, animal fat shortenings -- and beef tallow in particular -- have a much longer fry life than vegetable oils. Because of the higher saturated fat content, beef tallow is much more resistant to oxidation, hydrolysis and the other enemies of fry life. Consequently, switching from vegetable oils to beef tallow can reduce use by 25 percent or more.

That switch can mean that even a low-volume establishment can save thousands of pounds of waste (and dollars) a year. The potential savings for larger businesses, such as multi-unit chain restaurants (regional and national), hospitality venues (such as hotels and casinos), and high-volume Quick Service Restaurants can be tremendous.

Furthermore, not only does this save money up front, it significantly reduces the amount of used oil that must be disposed of later. How much are you paying to have your waste oil hauled away? (And speaking of hauling away garbage, each 35lb JIB of oil contains more than 10oz of plastic container that is frequently not recycled. Each 50-pound cube of animal fat shortening contains a 1.25 oz plastic liner that is easily recycled.)

It is indeed possible to save money and be more environmentally friendly.

Ernest R. Miller is Corporate Chef at [Coast Packing Company](#) in Vernon Calif. This article is excerpted from the white paper, “VIVA la Tradición: Renovate Your Menu with Authentic Ingredients” (Coast Packing Co., 2017).