

## **In Praise of Fat (Actually, in Praise of Flavor)**

*Ernest R. Miller*

Fat doesn't get enough love. Or credit.

Consider frying and fried foods, perhaps America's favorite guilty pleasure. Frying fats are not only a cooking medium, but an ingredient as well, since all fried foods absorb at least some of the frying fat. As a frying medium, fats will give different results and, as ingredient, they will impart different tastes. Batter, breading and rubs are, of course, important to the flavor and texture of fried foods. But the fat used for frying doesn't typically get factored into the taste equation, and it should.

The choice of fat for frying is critical in creating the best fried items. Just ask McDonald's. One of Ray Kroc's suppliers once noted to the founder that McDonald's wasn't in the hamburger business -- it was in the French fry business. McDonald's hamburgers were good, but the chain's fries were generally considered the best there ever was. That is, until 1990, when McDonald's switched from using beef tallow for frying to vegetable oil. As best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell has noted, the fries have never been the same (or as good) since that change (<http://www.grubstreet.com/2017/08/malcolm-gladwell-feels-betrayed-by-mcdonalds-french-fries.html>).

Heritage cooking fats, such as lard and beef tallow, were our frying medium of choice for centuries. The first published account of donuts refers to frying them in lard. Japanese tempura was originally fried in lard. The first solid vegetable shortening (Crisco®) wasn't even invented until 1911 and was specifically engineered to mimic lard.

Why? Because, as shortenings, lard and tallow are solid at room temperature and consequently possess superior frying characteristics. Unlike oils, which are liquid at room temperature, items fried in shortenings are crisper, less greasy (because they absorb up to 50 percent less fat), hold their texture longer, and have reduced weeping. As food historian John T. Edge has noted, when it comes to fried chicken "a great crust requires liquid swine."

Furthermore, shortenings are also more resistant to degradation and rancidity – they simply last longer. Beef tallow has a fry life as much as 50 percent greater than commodity soy oil. Oils, because of the high polyunsaturated fat content, are also subject to much higher rates of polymerization, making them more difficult to clean afterwards. That sticky residue on your fryers that's so challenging to remove? That's polymerized oil.

Great crust, check. Longer-lasting and easier to clean, check.

Perhaps most important, however, is the flavor that natural animal fats bring to frying. Promoters of highly processed seed ("vegetable") oils make the claim that their oils are flavorless, so you can taste the food, not the fat. This is, at best, exceedingly misleading. It's like saying that rather than cooking in a flavorful liquid such as stock or a court bouillon,

you should rely on plain water since it has no flavor. Or, perhaps, that you should use a flavorless margarine instead of butter. Absurd!

Noticed any restaurants touting their “Canola Oil French Fries”? Neither have I. Instead, restaurants emphasize that they use “duck fat” for their fries or, increasingly, “beef fat fries” (see: Umami Burger and Plan Check in Los Angeles, Top Round Roast Beef, SmashBurger, etc.). Unlike veg oils, heritage cooking fats bring *umami* to the plate. Potatoes fried in beef tallow taste more like potato. Chicken fried in beef tallow tastes more like chicken. There is a reason that Popeye’s Louisiana Kitchen fries its chicken in beef tallow, and it isn’t to make the chicken taste like beef.

What about vegetarian frying? Truth be told, most of the frying being done in restaurants today -- even by those frying with vegetable oils -- is not vegetarian. For example, if an establishment is frying chicken nuggets, some of the chicken fats and proteins will render into the frying oil. That oil can no longer be considered vegetarian. Even though the ingredients for the French fries might be “potatoes, soy oil and salt,” they’ve shared a fryer with chicken and can no longer be considered vegetarian or vegan.

The moral is, we need to embrace our guilty pleasures (or at least this one), and then acknowledge that for reasons of health as well as taste, we’ve got absolutely nothing to feel guilty about.

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