



## Time to Go Back To Animal Fats?

How a return to the basics can help brands boost flavor and efficiency.

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COAST PACKING COMPANY

**Chef Ernie Miller explains why restaurants might want to make the switch back to animal shortening.**

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For the restaurant industry, it's a real pickle. Consumers are talking up healthier fare and government regulations in some cases are mandating it, but diners continue to value flavor and are in no mood to pay extra for nutritionally correct—and often less

than delectable—food. In seeking to balance these competing demands, what's a chef to do?

There actually is a simple way for restaurants to provide everything consumers want, by returning to animal shortenings. At first glance, that may seem counter-intuitive, a repudiation of what nutritionists have taught for years—that cutting animal fats and replacing them with seed oils, such as soybean or canola, can lead to a smaller waistline, as well as improved heart health. Recent medical findings, however, cast serious doubt on these teachings.

A [study published last year in BMJ](#), an international peer-reviewed medical journal, refuted the claim that increasing vegetable oil consumption over animal fats improved heart health. While the study did find that vegetable oil could lower cholesterol, using seed oils did not decrease the risk of heart disease in participants.

For this reason—as well as a way to increase flavor and gain some real sustainability benefits—restaurants are once again turning to animal fats. Ernie Miller, a corporate chef for research and development at [Coast Packing Company](#), explains why the quick-service industry might want to reconsider using traditional fats.

### **1. What are animal shortenings?**

Animal shortenings are heritage cooking fats that come from animals and are used for a wide variety of cooking and baking applications. We call them shortenings because these ingredients, such as pork lard and beef tallow, are solid at room temperature. There are animal fats that Coast Packing doesn't make, such as butter, duck fat; chicken fat, also known as schmaltz; and others that are very popular in cooking.

These animal cooking fats are what people used for thousands of years, until Crisco vegetable shortening was invented in 1911. Before that time, other shortenings simply weren't available. The options were animal fat, butter or nothing.

### **2. Many restaurants shifted away from using animal fats for nutritional reasons. Why should they reconsider?**

For decades, the USDA's dietary guidelines frightened people away from animal fats by saying that these substances would give people heart attacks. Since then, we've discovered that these health claims are, at best, misleading. The partially hydrogenated vegetable oils that they were encouraging us to use were full of trans-fats, which are so

bad for our health that the federal government has passed legislation to ban them nationwide next year, meaning that restaurants will have to turn to other options.

Additionally, many of the fastest growing consumer diets in the U.S. today—Paleo, Atkins and low-carb—emphasize eating more “healthy” fats and protein and fewer carbohydrates and processed oils, such as industrial seed oils, like canola and soybean. As a result, many consumers are looking for traditional fats, like olive oil, lard, beef tallow, and others. This can actually make the use of pork lard and beef tallow selling points to distinguish concepts from competitors, and sure enough, both are appearing on more and more menus. No one regards frying in canola oil as a selling point.

### **3. How else can animal shortenings help restaurants appeal to customers?**

Today’s consumers are seeking authentic and traditional dishes. They want the real thing, not overly processed artificial substitutes. When it comes to cooking, vegetable oils are artificial substitutes for what humans have used for thousands of years. Crisco, for example, was made specifically to mimic lard.

In American cooking, fried chicken is traditionally cooked in lard or tallow. Burgers and fries is the quintessential American dish, and fries were traditionally cooked in tallow. Even with the rise of global cuisine, consumers want authentic dishes. In traditional Asian cuisine, for example, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Philippine foods are cooked in lard. The original frying fat for tempura, again, was lard. This opens up many opportunities to use animal shortenings to increase authenticity in dishes across many cuisines and cultures.

Animal fats also improve flavor and texture. They are not as greasy or oily as vegetable oils, and they don’t weep. Foods cooked in animal shortenings stay crispy and last longer in the window. Animal fats also contain trace flavor compounds, which provide umami to dishes so that French fries taste more like potato and chicken tastes more like chicken. Food cooked in heritage cooking fats simply tastes better.

### **4. What are the operational benefits of cooking with animal fats?**

Many animal fats, Coast products included, are cost-competitive with seed oils right out of the box. We’re much cheaper than fancier oils that have been fractionated, interesterified, manipulated, and created using genetically modified crops, which are all trying to replicate what animal fats do naturally. Animal oils have an extended fry life that helps restaurant save money and reduce waste.

Animal shortening also promotes nose-to-tail eating, since 12 percent of a cow is fat trim, which we turn into tallow. If you're already serving hamburgers and steak and not cooking fries with beef tallow, you're letting a significant amount of the animal go to waste.

*Ernest Miller is Coast Packing's first corporate chef. He is a member of the speakers' bureau for the Culinary Historians of Southern California and lecturer for the National Food and Beverage Foundation. He was formerly a chef instructor for Le Cordon Bleu Los Angeles and was educated at the United States Naval Academy and Yale Law School.*

*Now marking its 95th year in business, **Coast Packing Company**, is the number one supplier of animal fat shortenings—particularly lard and beef tallow—in the Western United States. The company sells to major manufacturers, distributors, retailers, smaller food service operations, and leading bakeries. The company participates actively in various ethnic markets, from Hispanic retail chains, with its VIVA brand, to various Asian specialty markets. Coast is a founding member of the **Healthy Fats Coalition**.*