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FOREIGN EXCHANGE

France bans ketchup in cafeterias

Well, it's allowed with one side dish (guess which one). But putting it on veal or boeuf bourguignon is now *interdit* at schools nationwide.

By Kim Willsher, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Paris

First France built a wall around its language to protect it from pernicious Anglo-Saxon invaders. Now it is throwing up a shield against another perceived threat to its culture and civilization: ketchup.

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In an effort to promote healthful eating and, it has been suggested, to protect traditional Gallic cuisine, the French government has banned school and college cafeterias nationwide from offering the American tomato-based condiment with any food but — of all things — French fries.

As a result, students can no longer use ketchup on such traditional

dishes as veal stew, no matter how gristly, and boeuf bourguignon, regardless of its fat content.

Moreover, French fries can be offered only once a week, usually with steak *hache*, or burger. Not clear is whether the food police will send students to detention if they dip their burgers into the ketchup that accompanies their fries.

"France must be an example to the world in the quality of its food, starting with its children," said Bruno Le Maire, the agriculture and food minister.

Ronald Reagan's White House may have considered ketchup — made famous by Henry John "H J." Heinz, who produced the first bottle in 1876 — a vegetable. But Gallic gastronomes view it with the same disdain as American television series, English words and McDonald's restaurants: unwelcome cultural impostors.

Jacques Hazan, president of the Federation of School Pupils' and College Students' Parents Councils, told the Times of London that the new regulations are a "victory."

The rules call for school officials to cut down on fatty foods and introduce more vegetables, fruit and dairy products. Four or five dishes must be offered each day with a serving of cooked or raw vegetables, preferably seasonal. Pupils can have unlimited amounts of bread and water.

Recommendations that included the ketchup cutback were made by government researchers more than four years ago, but the decree took effect only this week, a month after the start of the school year. It applies immediately to all cafeterias in schools and government buildings except those serving fewer than 80 meals a day. Cafeterias must keep records for school health officials of what has been served.

The rules leave young ketchup lovers here little choice. French schoolchildren are not allowed to bring home-prepared lunches to school and must either eat in the cafeteria or go home for lunch. School

and college cafeterias serve 1 billion meals a year, according to the government.

Le Maire said the changes were introduced because common sense rules on nutrition have not been followed in the nation's schools.

"Six million children eat in canteens every day, but 1 in 2 of them is still hungry when they leave," he said. "Nutritional rules are neither applied or controlled. We are making them obligatory and we will be keeping an eye on the menus."

The government acknowledges on its website that fewer than half of college and high school students think the food in school cafeterias is good. At the same time, figures published on the Ministry of Agriculture website say that fewer than half of France's youngsters are getting enough dairy products in their home diet.

Christophe Hebert, chairman of the National Assn. of Directors of Collective Restaurants, suggested that a large portion of cultural chauvinism is also behind the new rules.

"Canteens have a public health mission and also an educative mission. We have to ensure that children become familiar with French recipes so that they can hand them down to the following generation," he told the Times of London .

"We absolutely have to stop children from being able to serve those sorts of sauces to themselves with every meal. Children have a tendency to use them to mask the taste of whatever they are eating."

"Food is very important here," said Hazan of the parents federation, "and we can't have children eating any old thing."

Willsher is a special correspondent.

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