

History of Healthy Fast Food

- [Brad Tuttle @bradrtuttle](#) Aug. 14, 2014

Burger King's much-hyped low-calorie French fries have failed to resonate with customers, which shouldn't come as a surprise given why diners go to places like BK in the first place.

American fast food customers have spoken, and what they essentially have said is that when they're hungry for French fries, they're focused on the fries, not calories. The message comes by way of [Burger King's announcement](#) that after months of lackluster sales, its "Satisfries" — [introduced last fall](#) as a regular fry alternative with 30% fewer calories and 40% less fat — would disappear from two-thirds of BK's North American locations. It didn't help the Satisfries cause that they cost more than regular fries, \$1.89 versus \$1.59 for a small order.

What's particularly interesting is that in the same week that Satisfries have more or less been declared a failure, Burger King reintroduced a style of "fries" back to the menu that no one is pretending is health food: [Chicken](#)

Fries. In both cases, BK is saying that the decision was ultimately made by customers. Diners didn't order enough Satisfries to keep them on most menus, so they're gone. And as a [press release](#) explained, the return of the “cult favorite menu item” of breaded chicken strip “fries” was “sparked by an overwhelming number of enthusiastic tweets, Change.org petitions, dedicated Tumblr and Facebook pages, and phone calls from devoted fans.”

In other words, Burger King maintains that it's simply giving diners what they want. Wendy's spread the same message this week, announcing that the reason its Pretzel Bacon Cheeseburger—the [biggest success in fast food](#) last year—would now be on the menu permanently is because that's what customers have demanded. “You said ‘bring it back.’ So we did,” [Wendy's Tweeted](#) earlier this week of the [680-calorie burger](#). “Then you said “keep it on the menu.” And so it is.

Over the years, consumer groups and nutrition and anti-obesity advocates have pressed fast food giants to add items and tweak menus with a different purpose in mind—to help people to eat better, rather than just satisfy their cravings for grease and salt. The history of healthy (or “better for you”) fast food extends back decades, but probably hit its stride in 2004, when McDonald's, under pressure after the documentary “Super Size Me,” [dumped the super-size](#) upsell option for fries and drinks. The odd celebrification (not a

word, but you get the idea) of [Jared Fogle](#), whose 200-pound weight loss supposedly due to dining exclusively on Subway sandwiches was chronicled in years of TV commercials, has permeated the era of fast food chains at least pretending to make genuine efforts to add healthier fare to menus.

The effort to woo more health-conscious diners—or perhaps just to get the health nuts off their backs—continues today. Earlier this year, [Dunkin' Donuts](#), for instance, significantly expanded its DDSmart menu, adding whole wheat bagels and sliced turkey breakfast sandwiches as alternatives to mainstays like the glazed or Boston Crème. McDonald's has tried several healthier sides as non-French fry options in its kids' Happy Meals: Low-fat Go-Gurt was added recently, and Clementines, bananas, and other [fruits are being tested](#) starting this fall.

Overall, however, the biggest players in fast food's attempts at selling healthier options are riddled with more failures than big sales success stories. For example, before trying fruit, McDonald's had offered baby carrots with Happy Meals, but very few customers went with that option—not even when the carrots were chopped to resemble cartoon characters.

In addition to Satisfries, here are a few other notable failures in the “healthy” fast food movement:

Dairy Queen Breeze: A healthier version of the Blizzard made with frozen yogurt instead of ice cream, the Breeze was introduced in 1990 and discontinued in 2000. Too bad it didn't stick around for the [yogurt craze](#) that started a decade later.

McDonald's McLean Deluxe: Introduced as a "revolutionary" 91% fat free burger in 1991, the McLean was foiled almost immediately when it was [revealed to include carrageenan](#) (a.k.a. seaweed) as an ingredient. It was dropped from the menu a few years later, and is now considered one of the [biggest McDonald's flops](#) of all time.

Pizza Hut's The Natural: The all-natural organic pizza made with multigrain crust sweetened with honey debuted in 2008 and was declared "a big opportunity" by [Pizza Hut innovators](#). But The Natural cost about \$1 more than a regular pizza, and it [quietly disappeared](#) by 2010.

McDonald's Fruit and Walnut Salad: [Health](#) magazine was a fan, naming this mix of apples, grapes, walnuts, and low-fat yogurt to its list of "America's Healthiest Mall Food," but McDonald's pulled the plug in 2013 after "listening to our customers," a company spokesperson told [Reuters](#).

What's particularly interesting about salads is that while virtually every fast food brand feels like they must

offer them, greens don't sell. In 2013, McDonald's CEO [Don Thompson told investors](#) that salads only constituted 2% to 3% of U.S. sales, compared to around 14% for dollar menu items.

There are even some who make the argument that McDonald's shouldn't waste any energy preparing salads and other healthier options. "McDonald's is never going to be perceived as healthy, so for them to spend too much time on healthy items doesn't make a lot of sense to me," one investment analyst explained to the [Wall Street Journal](#) last fall.

Sadly, then, the hardcore business advice would be for McDonald's and the rest of the fast food field to stick with their core business approach by focusing on instantly gratifying greasy fare, calories and fat be damned. Consumers may say they want healthier options, but their actions (and dollars) speak louder than words. Even the addition of [calorie counts on menus](#) are shown to not have much impact on what customers order at restaurants. A concept like Satisfries sounds great on paper, but when customers are up at the counter or eyeing the drive-thru menu, the idea of low-calorie anything probably isn't top of mind. It just doesn't seem satisfying enough.