

Long Island

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STYLE

Health & Wellness

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A trend toward Healthier Dining on LI

FIRST, THE BLOOMBERG ADMINISTRATION ANNOUNCED IT. THEN NASSAU COUNTY FOLLOWED SUIT. AND THAT LEAVES SOME TO SUSPECT THAT SUFFOLK CAN'T BE FAR BEHIND.

We're talking a phase-out of artificial trans fats in restaurants. To a backdrop of public outcry against such government intervention, and fears that beloved fried foods would no longer taste scrumptious, health departments in Nassau and New York City have forged onward, ultimately to give customers some peace of mind that the food they eat is not cooked in artery-clogging trans fat.

In Nassau the ban is to take effect on April 1, 2008, with respect to oils, shortenings and margarines containing artificial trans fats that are used for frying or in spreads. New York City, meanwhile, is calling for restaurants there to comply by July 1, 2008.

"From a public health standpoint, it's good," says Stephen Green, a cardiologist at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset.

But will the trend lead to healthier dining on Long Island? Local health experts say it's a step in the right direction — especially because consumption of trans fats may increase blood cholesterol and the risk for heart disease.

Ten percent to 19 percent of the coronary heart disease cases in the United States, which translates to 120,000 to 228,000 heart attacks, could be averted by reducing the intake of trans fats, according to researchers at Harvard University.

Health officials in Nassau say the county sees approximately 5,000 deaths per year from cardiovascular disease. To lower the risk of heart disease, the County's new regulations stipulate that the frying oils used to prepare the food at

restaurants will contain less than 0.5 grams of trans fats per serving.

But a trans fat ban does not mean restaurants are using healthy oils. In fact, it could be anything but — especially if the restaurant doesn't regularly filter or change the oil. Any oil past its "fry life" creates unhealthy byproducts, according to the American Heart Association.

As Michelle Kowalski, a nutritionist and dietician who is the director of NutriHealth Weight Loss System and Counseling in Port Washington, puts it, "It's not the oil, it's how they use it."

To respond, restaurateurs may need to invest in new oils, and perhaps new recipes, to answer to both health inspectors and health conscious consumers. But diners, experts say, must realize that the onus to eat good-for-you foods still falls on them. The best choices, Green says, are entrees that are baked or broiled — methods that are far less oil-dependent on cooking oil than fried items.

In other words, even if your fish and chips platter — arguably not the healthiest menu choice — is cooked in canola oil, the oil itself can pose problems. If that oil is not monitored closely and changed regularly — a labor-intensive and costly procedure — you are still consuming an unhealthy oil.

Some restaurateurs say they have seen the writing on the wall.

"It's just a matter of time" before Suffolk imposes similar regulations, notes Don Sullivan, the owner of Southampton Public House in Southampton. Last spring, this casual American restaurant switched to trans fat free cooking oil. Sullivan also put in an oil management

system to better maintain the quality of cooking oil. And to respond to market trends, he introduced more salads and lighter fare on the menu, which now includes a note at the bottom stating that the eatery is trans fat free for the health concerns of its guests.

Like many restaurateurs, Sullivan was skeptical about how cooking with trans fat free oils would turn out. But the switch, along with the new oil management system has enabled the kitchen to produce "better quality food" that "cooks more evenly" and "looks as it should," Sullivan says.

John Tunney, III, the founder of American Burger Company, says the restaurant has been "trans fat free since day one," back in 2002. The restaurants, in Huntington and Hicksville, along with an offshoot called American Roadside slated to open in Smithtown, use an oil management system that filters oil twice a day. Tunney says that as the restaurants respond to market trends, vendors have to as well, and the trans-fat-free products are the better for it.

Indeed, restaurateurs needing assistance complying should talk to their distributors, says John King, chief customer service officer at J. Kings Food Service Professionals, a food distribution center in Holtsville. Or, they can look to the Internet for more information.

Tunney dismisses fears about any change in actual flavor as "a matter of what you're used to."

Bakers, King notes, will have more of a challenge making the switch. But in Nassau, they have until April 1, 2009, to comply.

As they look for new alternatives, they may want to consider the experience of Sullivan, who, in getting a head start, says, "People do notice when a place responds to what the market tells you."