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**The Warc Blog:**

**Ah, the French Fry**  
 Robert Passikoff, President, Brand Keys, Inc



The very first reference to French fried potatoes showed up in O. Henry's 1894 column, Rolling Stones: "Our countries are great friends. We have given you Lafayette and French fried potatoes." And whether you call them "French fries," "fries," "chips," or "frites," whether they come thick-cut, crinkled, straight, or curly, they've become a predictable staple in the American diet, most notably at quick-serve restaurants.

So predictable, in fact, that Jay Leno once joked, "I went to McDonald's and ordered some fries and the girl at the counter said, 'would you like some fries with that?'"

Nobody would deny that the taste of McDonald's French fries has played a critical role in the chain's success. Fries are much more profitable than hamburgers and people just love them. But the taste doesn't stem from the potato or the equipment that fries them. The secret lies in the cooking oil and for years McDonalds cooked their fires in oil that was mostly composed of beef tallow. You can make a face, but that's where the great taste came from. That changed about a decade ago when cholesterol criticism led them to switch to vegetable oil. But if you check their inventory of ingredients for their fries you'll find "natural flavor" on the list. Hmmmmm.

Anyway, are French fries about to get the respect they deserve? Well, Wendy's, as part of a program to promote food made with more natural ingredients, has kicked off a National campaign heralding a new recipe for French fries in what is positioned as the biggest overhaul of its fries in 41 years. From the news briefs it appears that they'll be using Russet Burbank potatoes (the same used by McDonald's) but will be keeping the skins on, will be slicing them thinner, frying them crisper, and sprinkling them with sea salt. No mention of their oil choice has been made.

According to our Customer Loyalty Engagement Index, here's how the major chains rank when it comes specifically to their fries:

1. McDonald's
2. Arby's
3. Hardees
4. Carl Jr.
5. Nathan's
6. Jack-in-the-Box/White Castle
7. KFC/Chic-Fil-A
8. Wendy's.
9. Popeye's
10. Sonic

A number of countries claim the "fry" as their own, but French peasant cuisine is most frequently credited as the creator of the dish and hence the nomenclature. They say this cuisine is the basis of a culinary art that is mostly composed of honest.

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natural elements. So maybe Wendy's new, natural approach will help to stem the decline French fry servings have seen over the past few years and add a little snap to the brand.

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The profit contribution fries make to the bottom line notwithstanding, the fast food chains really need to get their formulas for fries so that they meet customer expectations. These days when marketers (in any category) miss that mark, customers drop them like a hot potato!

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