

Target: Trans Fats

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There are doubtless many Oreophiles who would call a project to improve America's favorite cookie a form of heresy. None of them work for Peter Wilson, senior director of technology at Kraft Foods. Wilson and his team of food scientists and engineers have invested 30,000 hours in trying to convert the Oreo we know and love into one that tastes just like the original but is considerably less likely to clog snackers' arteries. The challenge: rid the recipe of its trans-fatty acids, a component of the fats as essential to the cookie's cream-infused crunch and texture as the circle is to its unbitten form. "We've tested over 200 recipes in 100 different trials, across 16 manufacturing lines," says Wilson. "The formulation is critical."

Wilson's exertions have been matched by those of his counterparts across the packaged-food industry. A Food and Drug Administration (FDA) rule goes into effect on Jan. 1 requiring nutrition labels to include the trans-fat content of packaged foods in which it exceeds half a gram per serving. Eager to pre-empt the requirement, manufacturers--from ABC Bakers, maker of Girl Scout Cookies, to Campbell Soup Co.--have been scrambling to come up with trans-fat-free recipes for their products.

Meanwhile, an anti-trans-fat movement led by public-interest groups is making waves in the \$476 billion restaurant industry, pestering such fast-food giants as McDonald's and Taco Bell. New York City this summer became the first metropolis to ask its restaurants to (voluntarily) remove the offending oil from their dishes.

That, as many a manufacturer will attest, is easier said than done. Trans fats are byproducts in hydrogenated oils--whose constituent fats have been chemically altered by the addition of hydrogen atoms. Those oils are loved by restaurateurs because they can be repeatedly reheated without breaking down and by food processors because they're resistant to rancidity. They also provide much of the comfort in comfort food, accounting for everything from the flavor of chips to the flaky layering of croissants to the stubborn moistness of muffins.

Researchers have known since at least the 1990s that trans fats are doubly bad for the heart. They boost bad-cholesterol (LDL) levels and depress good-cholesterol (HDL)

levels in the blood. The Department of Health and Human Services estimates that processed foods and oils account for 80% of the national intake of trans fats. The FDA suggests you cut down as much as possible on the fats. One study concluded that eliminating hydrogenated oils could prevent up to 100,000 premature coronary deaths a year.

PepsiCo, whose Frito-Lay snack foods represent 62% of its North American business, in September 2002 became one of the first food processors to cut trans fats, starting with its Doritos, Tostitos and Cheetos lines. The company says the conversion, which involved modifying 187 production lines and required 250 analytical tests of the reformulated snacks, trimmed \$22 million from its bottom line in 2003. Taking the trans fats out of a product without affecting taste is often far more complex and costly than developing a new one from scratch. That's partly why Kraft had to be pushed to speed up its efforts. The nudge came from a lawsuit filed by British-born lawyer and trans-fat crusader Stephen Joseph, founder of BanTransFats.com.