Burgers losing their buns

Fast-food chains getting smart with meals that spare the carbs and mollify their critics

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They've been beaten up and put down. They've been accused and threatened. And still, they're trying to come out on top.

Fast-food companies have been faced with lawsuits, pressure to disclose what’s in their foods and a sagging public image. But one chain followed by another, they’re responding.

Burgers, fries and a drink, and the fast-food culture they’ve engendered, are aiming to change with the health-conscious times.

Burgers are losing their buns. Subs have been transformed into low-carb wraps. Salads are essential menu items.

This re-envisioning of the fast-food meal is accompanied by more aggressive tactics to get nutrition information out to customers.

You can ask for a nutrition pamphlet at the counter, but some chains are planning to or considering posting nutrition facts in stores, so you can read the fat and calorie content of that bacon cheeseburger and fries before you order.

All the major chains’ websites have prominent links to their nutrition information online, many of them including the amount of trans fats in their foods years ahead of Health Canada's deadline for doing so.

Business analysts have spotted the trend, pointing out that fast-food companies have turned the bad press of lawsuits and links to obesity into an opportunity to create a market for slimmed-down and diet offerings.

"It's just very logical in thinking," said Jack Russo, an industry analyst at brokerage firm A.G. Edwards. "They've been the bad guys supposedly, and now they’ve got to look like the good guys."

They're starting with their menus. The growing interest in low-carbohydrate diets has prompted a rethinking of that mainstay of fast-food culture -- the hamburger. For low-carb dieters, of which the ranks have grown, the bun is the enemy.

Just appearing in Burger King restaurants across the country, a few weeks behind their U.S. launch, are Whopper burgers without the buns.

"It does seem weird," said Catherine Ahad, manager of the outlet on Centennial Parkway North, where they haven't sold much from the low-carb menu yet.

The low-carb burger is a hamburger patty served in a plastic platter with lettuce, tomato and onion, but no ketchup or mayonnaise. There's also a grilled chicken version, lower on the fat and calorie scale.

The bunless burgers come with a knife and fork, taking away some of the convenience of portable fast food.

But it's apparently just what low-carb dieters have been asking for. Fast-food chains are falling in line behind everyone from food processors to brewers to introduce low-carb versions of their menu classics.

"In the U.S. and Canada we found that more and more of our guests are on low-carbohydrate diets," said Burger King Canada's Lisa Brenneman. "We want to ensure people have enough choice."

That seems to be a key word with fast-food company executives. Everyone hammers on that point in talking about their new low-fat or low-carb or low-cal offerings.

"It's all about choice," said McDonald's Canada spokesperson Richard Ellis. "We're doing things in direct response to what our customers have told us they want."

The company rolled out its Healthy Lifestyles campaign this week, focusing on more offerings for dieters, greater access to nutrition information and an emphasis on physical activity. The menu changes will begin in March. The company is expanding its Happy Meal choices for children, so instead of ordering a burger, fries and a pop, kids could get a grilled cheese, sliced fruits or vegetables, and milk, apple or orange juice. The fruits and veggies idea is being tested out, with some McDonald's offering "apple dippers," apple slices with caramel sauce.

The Happy Meal toys will promote activity, Ellis said. Adults will be able to order a grown-up version with a salad, bottled water and a pedometer. More salad choices are coming to the low-fat menu.

McDonald's is also flirting with the low-carb craze, getting ready to introduce protein platters, one for breakfast with eggs, cheese, bacon and sausage, and ones for the rest of the day with a hamburger patty or grilled chicken, cheese, pickles, tomato, lettuce and bacon.

No such moves as tossing the buns are afoot at Canadian chain Harvey's, although their 6-oz. Big Harv burgers are selling well, said spokesperson Rachel Douglas.

Just in time to cater to dieters' New Year's resolve, Subway is offering low-carb wraps -- combining several of their sub offerings in a lower-carb tortilla-style shell.

Unlike other fast-food chains, Subway has linked up with the company behind one of the most popular low-carb diets, Atkins, for its seal of approval. More low-carb offerings are on the way, said spokesperson Les Winograd, in light of the wraps' success.

"They have exceeded our expectations. Apparently they're flying out of the stores," he said. "There was a ready-made group of people who are hungry for this type of food."

In that regard, fast-food chains are simply following the consumer mood for healthier food and more information. But they're not re-inventing themselves. The Big Macs and double Whoppers and large fries remain.

"Offering the healthy options seems like it's intended to increase their flexibility," said Philip Cohen, a sociology professor at the University of California, Irvine, and creator of its sociology of food course. "They're still basically making their money selling meat and potatoes and soda and grains."