

In the Fast Food World, Is Fish the New Chicken?

By Brad Tuttle Feb. 08, 2013



JUSTIN SULLIVAN / GETTY IMAGES

A sign stands outside of a McDonald's restaurant in San Francisco in 2009.

McDonald's and Carl's Jr. are among the big fast food chains casting out new fish items as a way to reel in customers—especially during Lent, when many diners cut back on meat.

In recent months, fast food establishments have demonstrated a taste for chicken. Poultry has reached a new level of popularity among fast food restaurants and diners alike because it's a cheaper and healthier alternative to beef (or at least it's perceived to be so). Chicken is also easily prepared in bite-size portions (nuggets, dippers, McBites, etc.), making it a perfect fit for the rising culture of on-the-go snacking.

If one affordable, quick, and healthy (or at least healthier) snack proves to be a hit with customers, fast food restaurants are sure to see if similar offerings can succeed as well. That's why we're seeing a big push for fish lately. McDonald's just announced that for the first time ever it will offer its new Fish McBites in kids' happy meals now through March "to coincide with Lent," according to the *Associated Press*.

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It's no coincidence that Fish McBites made their first appearance during a test run last February, also during Lent—the period leading up to Easter when Catholics traditionally don't eat beef, poultry, or pork on Fridays. Moms in general have also said that they'd like to see more options

(and healthier options) in kids' meals, and kids tend to like finger foods that can be dipped. So Fish McBites should be appealing on several fronts.

McDonald's isn't the only quick-serve chain that's chosen the early part of the calendar year to launch a big fish initiative. This week, Carl's Jr. and Hardee's introduced the Charbroiled Atlantic Cod Fish Sandwich at all locations around the country. The company announced the new sandwich was aimed directly at consumers tweaking their diets during Lent, and also folks concerned about eating more healthfully in the new year:

"For almost half-a-century, whenever fast food customers wanted to get a fish sandwich during Lent, they had one choice: fried," said Brad Haley, chief marketing officer for Carl's Jr. and Hardee's. "With our new Charbroiled Atlantic Cod Fish Sandwich, we've changed all that. For the first time in the industry, our guests can get a premium-quality fish sandwich that tastes great and is lower in calories because we charbroil it just like we do our burgers."

To roll out the new limited-time item, the two sister brands are airing an ad featuring *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model Nina Agdal digging into sandwich while sunbathing in a bikini (and topless for a little while) on a tropical beach. The thinking is that the "healthy" young lass is a good match for the "healthy" new sandwich. Fair enough. It's unclear, though, what the religious Lent observers out there will make of all that skin—not to mention the suggestive way Agdal licks the tartar sauce off her finger.

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Meanwhile, next week, Wendy's will begin advertising its Premium Fish Fillet Sandwich, which the chain has made available for a limited time around Lent for a few years in a row. None of this means that fish will come anywhere near the popularity of chicken at fast food establishments anytime soon. But more and more, the February-March period is clearly peak season for fans of fast food fish treats.

And OK, we know some of you really want to see the fish sandwich ad with the swimsuit model—strictly out of curiosity concerning healthier fast food and meat alternatives during Lent, of course. Here you go: