

Fat Fight Becomes a Rumble in the Jungle: Paul Newman, Trans Fats & Orangutans

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New York Times Full Feed via NewsEdge Corporation: It all began simply enough, with the food industry exploring palm oil as an alternative to trans fat.

Now, Paul Newman is angry, orangutans are dying and sandwich cookies may never be the same.

The protagonist, if a story about dietary fat can have one, is Nell Newman, daughter of the actor Paul Newman. In 1993, she talked her father into starting a small organic line as part of his food company, Newman's Own, whose profits are funneled to charities. She did it by cooking him a Thanksgiving dinner using only organic ingredients.

Like other companies that mass-produce foods like cookies and crackers, Newman's Own Organics wanted to find a way to avoid using trans fat, an artificially created fatty acid found in what many home cooks call shortening.

Also known as partially hydrogenated oil, trans fat is considered the worst fat in the American diet. Not only does it raise bad cholesterol levels, it is also believed to reduce good cholesterol. The Agriculture Department's 2005 Dietary Guidelines suggest eating as little of it as possible, and this year the federal government forced food companies to include trans fat amounts on food labels.

Newman's Own Organics uses palm fruit oil, a dietary fat that carries its own controversy. The fruit of a palm tree is about the size of a large plum, and the flesh is pressed into an oil that is about 50 percent saturated.

The palm kernel is also used for oil, which is extracted with a chemical process. It has a much higher saturated fat content, but not quite as high as coconut oil, which is almost completely saturated.

Too much saturated fat, for people who haven't listened to their doctors lately, can lead to heart disease. Which is partly why the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nutrition advocacy group, has waged a campaign against palm oil.

The group's executive director, Michael Jacobson, said the concern is that food processors will replace partially hydrogenated oil with palm oil, a fat that is not as bad but still contributes to heart disease.

So far, the amount of palm oil in America's food supply is trivial compared to the amount of soy and canola oil.

"I want to keep it that way," Mr. Jacobson said. But the amount of palm oil the United States is

importing from Southeast Asia, where most of it comes from, continues to grow. Imports jumped to 405,000 metric tons in 2005 from 195,000 in 2003, statistics from the U.S.D.A. Foreign Agriculture Service show.

Here's where the orangutans come in. Last summer, the Center for Science in the Public Interest issued a report called Cruel Oil. In it, the group said that crucial tracts of tropical rainforest were being destroyed and turned into palm plantations in Malaysia and Indonesia, which account for more than 80 percent of the production of the world's palm oil. Orangutans live only in Sumatra and Borneo, and the campaign said they and other endangered animals, including tigers and rhinoceroses, were in danger of "dying for a cookie."

Here's where Paul Newman comes in. Mr. Jacobson and the report's other authors accuse Mr. Newman of "bragging" on his labels for cookies and microwave popcorn that palm oil is free of trans fat and is less saturated than palm kernel oil.

"These statements are literally true, but mislead people into thinking that palm oil is positively healthy," the report said. "Palm oil is not a health food."

For Ms. Newman, who contributes a large amount of time and money to sustainable farming and other environmental causes, the move against her family company seemed unfair. Her father was even angrier.

"It really upset Pops," said Ms. Newman. He became obsessed with proving that the form of palm oil the company uses is a healthier alternative to trans fats and that Newman's Own Organics isn't misleading its customers.

The company uses palm oil from trees grown organically in Colombia, which has no orangutans, said Neil Blomquist, former chief executive officer and president of Spectrum Organic Products, which sells Newman's Own its palm oil. The company's oil is harvested with practices that exceed principles set forth in the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, a group whose members include growers, processors and environmentalists, Mr. Blomquist said.

Some of the plantations are planted as part of the United States government's efforts to give farmers an alternative to coca crops, he said. Mr. Blomquist, who now consults with the Hain Celestial Group, which purchased Spectrum, has visited the Colombian palm fields.

Mr. Blomquist, like a number of nutritionists and sellers of health food, thinks palm fruit oil and the form of saturated fat it contains are healthier than the kind of saturates that come from beef or pork.

"It provides a very excellent source of what I would call at a minimum health-neutral oil, but I think there are some health pluses," he said.

When it comes to the science of dietary fats, what to eat when is a moving target. Research into which fats are beneficial and which pave a quick path to a heart attack continues. And, as demonstrated by the turn-around the Center for Science in the Public Interest and others had to

make on trans fats and margarine, which were once considered healthy alternatives to butter, science is sometimes wrong.

Dr. Walter Willett, chairman of the department of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health, said he would take palm oil over trans fats any day if the recipe in question needed a little hard fat.

"If you're careful you don't need very much, then palm oil is one of the better choices," he said. "A lot of saturated fat isn't all bad. It's not as adverse as people had thought in the past."

Still, he encourages people to use liquid oil like canola or olive oil whenever possible, and to limit saturated fats overall.

Some companies trying to find a fat that will tolerate the abuse of high-volume food production while providing the texture of trans fat have turned to high-oleic canola oil or safflower oil. Others use liquid oil that has been hardened with full hydrogenation and then softened with more liquid oil. Others are working with a process called intersterification, which involves enzymes. On the palm oil front, things had calmed down around the Newman household until last month, when Mr. Jacobson's group ran a full-page ad in The New York Times that featured a photo of a baby orangutan surrounded by orangutan skulls. Palm oil production, the ad said, "is killing orangutans."

For Ms. Newman, whose work with endangered peregrine falcons got her into organics in the first place, making a connection between hurting animals and her cookies is egregious. But the Newmans didn't want to jump into the ring with Mr. Jacobson again.

"When he doesn't get what he wants, he just ups the ante," said Peter Meehan, who runs the organic arm of the food company with Ms. Newman.

And Mr. Newman, who had spent months on the issue, didn't want to talk about it either.

"He doesn't know what he could add at this point," said Mr. Meehan.

The Malaysian Palm Oil Promotion Council is none too happy with Mr. Jacobson either. It took out a half-page advertisement in The New York Times yesterday objecting to his assertions that palm oil production destroys habitats and promotes heart disease.

Mr. Jacobson denies that he has a personal campaign against the Newmans and concedes that their palm oil isn't killing orangutans. But he still takes their labeling to task.

He suggested that the Newmans use labeling language that would get someone laughed out of marketing school: "They may be environmentally sound, but don't eat these cookies if you really care about your heart." Adding It Up

Unless you're a dietitian or enjoy doing math before meals, figuring out how much saturated fat you are eating can be a challenge. No more than 10 percent of the calories you eat in a day

should come from saturated fat. For people who eat 2,000 calories a day, that's about 22 grams.

Imagine three brands of sandwich cookies with saturated fats from different sources. To reach the daily allowance of saturated fat intake, you could eat 29 Newman-O's, sandwich cookies made with palm oil. Choose Oreos, which contain canola and palm oils, and you could consume 33. But if you prefer organic sandwich cookies that use high-oleic sunflower oil instead of palm oil, you could eat 88 Country Choice cookies. (Of course, that would be 5,720 calories.)

Photos: PAUL NEWMAN owns a cookie company; NEWMAN-O'S are made with palm fruit oil; ORANGUTANS are caught in a cookie debate. (Photos by from left, Douglas Healey/Associated Press; Tony Cenicola/The New York Times; Tom Hood/Associated Press)

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