

To butter or not to butter; ah, that is the question

By Agi Oblas

There are lots of questions in health care that are subject to debate, and the butter vs. margarine argument is one of them. And we owe it all to Emperor Napoleon III.

I don't know why, but in 1870 he challenged French chemists to produce a substitute for butter. The prize went to a Frenchman, Mege-Mouriez, who used a lustrous, pearly colored component called margaric acid (named after the Greek word for pearl *margarite*). And voila! Margarine was born. Within 10 years, margarine was being mass-produced in the United States but not without controversy; a controversy, which has gone through



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endless, twists and turns ever since.

In the early 1900s and continuing till the post World War II era, the controversies were mostly economic with the quasi-militant dairy industry duking it out with margarine manufacturers legislatively attempting to either limit production of the artificial butter or by imposing excessive taxes on production, requiring special licenses for manufacturing, or inflating post production prices to the consumer. In the 21st century's version of the debate, the issues center on the questions of health: Which product is less likely to contribute to the development of heart disease?

For a long time, margarine was believed to be the healthier alternative because it is made from unsaturated vegetable oils and butter's source is animal fat. Fortunately, (or unfortunately if your paycheck is covered somehow by the margarine industry) research has shown that the manner of producing margarine is actually the contributing factor to the development of heart disease.

Oils need to go through a process called hydrogenation to become margarine. Hydrogenation is a

process that involves hydrogen, metal catalysts and heat, which turn the oil into a firmer product. The fats in these hydrogenated oils are now termed trans fats and further research has shown that it is the trans fats that are even worse for contributing to heart disease than the plain old saturated fats from butter because the trans fats raise the levels of the bad cholesterol LDL and lower the good cholesterol HDL.

So what's a health-conscious human being supposed to do?

Well, since ounce for ounce, trans fats are far worse than saturated fats when it comes to heart disease you could avoid all margarines and butter entirely and not have to deal with the issue at all. Or, if you still choose margarine, at least choose the softer versions (they come in tubs as apposed to stick forms), which are less hydrogenated, i.e. containing less trans fats. Or, you could use butter, but in limited the quantities. Or, you could be like Napoleon and challenge chemists to come up with a butter/margarine substitute that tastes good, spreads well, and is definitely very, very healthy.

Oops, sorry. Somebody beat us to it. There are now "buttery tasting" spreads available that are not hydrogenated and therefore have no trans fats and are therefore very heart healthy. Stay tuned for next month's installment of "As the World Churns."

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