

McDonald's came to my town about 1966. President Johnson was a freakishly large man with huge dangling ears. His Vietnam War was being fought out in every living room in the country on TV news each night. Martin Luther King was two years away from being shot in the face for his courage, and every third song on WICE was by the Beatles, except during the nightly Beatles Hour, when every tune aired was by them.

Nowadays, people are used to shiny plastic and bright colors, but in 1966 the landscape was a modest beige. The sight of those two golden arches girdling all that red and white tile and glass was absolutely arresting. Hamburgers were 15 cents (soon to rise to .18). The entire menu consisted of hamburgers, cheeseburgers, fries (made on-site from actual potatoes), sodas (coke, root beer, orange), and shakes (chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, coffee). The filet o' fish sandwich was a year away, and chicken McNuggets had yet to be imagined.

My dad brought home white paper bags edged with grease stains that hinted at the delights inside. All the condiments were layered atop the burger in scientifically calibrated precision doses – onions (actually dried onion flakes that fleshed out nicely from the beef fat), ketchup, mustard, and a single pickle slice that had been thoroughly field-tested to get its degree of sourness agreeable to the widest possible range of tongues. All that clinical perfection was impressive. I pictured serious men wearing glasses and lab coats glancing at their clipboards and consulting in hushed tones with each other.

Unit #584 quickly became the physical core of my high school's social culture. No evening cruise was complete without a spin through the parking lot to see and be seen, even on school nights with a big test the next morning. On weekend nights the dateless would sit in their cars for hours, nursing paper cups filled with coke laced with vodka. They would be joined throughout the evening by couples stopping by after a movie, then late by stag boys in their father's station wagons who had just dropped off their dates after a session of light or heavy petting and now wanted to lie about it.

Each night the entire cloying melodrama of adolescence played out its tightly scripted self less than a mile from my house. I knew I wanted to be there as much as possible. I filled out the application and was hired on the spot as an apprentice grillman. I was 16. No women were allowed the honor of working in Ronald's kingdom for \$1.25 an hour. Now that I think of it, even Ronald had yet to be invented for at least another year or so.

The patties weren't frozen, but stiff cold from the walk-in freezer. They lived in cardboard boxes – 96 to the box, each separated by a thin slice of paper. Once thawed completely they could be slapped hard on a hot grill, 12 at a time in two rows of six. A good grillman could deal out a dozen in about ten seconds. A rush called for double twelves; a big rush, say after a basketball game, would mean running 24s or even double 24s. That's 48 burgers at one time, all preparing themselves precisely and equally for the human digestive system.

I was provided with a white paper cap, white short-sleeved shirt, white apron. I was told to wear black pants which I would provide for myself. In the basement we watched training films in a stuffy space jammed to the ceiling with signage, stored Christmas decorations and great piles of Idaho potatoes in burlap sacks. The films were all about washing your hands, straightening your cap properly, and constantly smiling. Everyone was under strict orders to be happy all the time. Company policy.

I was too green for the grill, and so stood by a huge aluminum tray where I laid out 24 bun tops. The bottoms were placed on the burgers once they'd been turned. In one hand I held the mustard gun, in the other the ketchup gun. They really did look a little like pistols as I roamed across the surface of the tray, giving each bun a single squirt: first the mustard, then the ketchup, each squirt carefully designed to hit the bun with exactly the correct field-tested and focus-grouped dollop.

The grillman sprinkled the patties with onion flakes from a tool that resembled two salt shakers attached to a single handle. Meanwhile I went back over the buns, carefully placing a pickle slice in the center of each. Once assembled, the steaming tray was lifted onto a metal ledge above the wrapping papers, where the windowmen would wrap each in a single fluid move: white with blue lettering for the burgers, yellow with red lettering for the cheese. A good wrapper could stack 24 neatly papered burgers into the holding bin in under a minute. In a few months I would prove to be among the fastest. Ordinarily a run of 24 would contain about 4 to 6 cheeseburgers. Cheeseburgers, as I recall, went for .25 – a full dime above the .15 burgers. A slice of cheese, hideously yellow & utterly American, cost something like .02 – at the time McDonald's biggest profit margin.

I never did manage to become much of a grillman. I kept burning myself and was lax about scraping the grill down constantly between running the dozens. I have no idea what McDonald's cleanliness standards are these days – I haven't eaten at one in years – but back in '66 everything had to be wiped down, scraped and scrubbed several times a day. If business slowed up you were handed a mop & bucket. The windowmen in the front would clean off the various counters and holding bins with coca cola, which was terrific for eating through ketchup stains and mustard drippings. Just imagine what it does to your stomach lining. At any rate, my ineptitude on the grill led Jim, the manager, to try me out on fries.

I've read that McDonald's fries these days come pre-packaged and frozen. What's more, they are now fried in some sort of beef-enhanced substance that, according to extensive scientific research, causes otherwise normal people to crave ever more, to super-size themselves into the ballooning, hulking obesity that is the image of today's average American citizen. Not so back in the day.

Our potatoes came to us as actual spuds, a little dirty, with the skins on and eyes. We had a peeling machine, a cylinder with rough walls where they were hosed down and spun until nearly naked. Then they'd be sliced into customary shape in a slicer with a big plunger handle. Then they'd be blanched – pre-fried in deep fat in baskets, so as to be ready to be finished to golden brown with just a quick dunk in the fat, lightly salted and served up hot. And they were, really, actually – delicious. "Remember", Jim intoned gravely in words I was never to forget, "You can put salt on,

but you can never take it away". A metaphor applicable to nearly everything, and one by which I have tried to live my life.