

Fast food talking to chefs about increasing nutrition

By Stephanie Strom, New York Times

ST. HELENA — The chicken thighs, smoked for two hours, then soaked in buttermilk spiked with Crystal hot sauce and dredged in flour, turned a perfect golden brown, full of the promise of succulence and crunch, under the stern watch of Chef H. Alexander Talbot.

But not one, alas, went into a salivating mouth as soon as it left the bubbling rice bran oil. Rather, it was rushed under a glass “udder” bristling with slender filaments and tended by technicians, who would soon analyze it at a PepsiCo lab in Illinois for the magic that gave it such flavor and crispiness.

Other creations, destined for the same lab, went into Styrofoam containers bedded on dry ice, part of a continuing effort to find new ways to improve the nutritional quality of the giant food company’s products without losing recognizable flavors.

“The challenge facing us and other big food companies today is not easy: to have a great-tasting product without as much salt, fat and sugar,” said Greg Yep, senior vice president for long-term research and development at PepsiCo. “Chefs have ways of tricking the taste buds that we can use in our products.”

Prodded by consumers, regulators and politicians, major food companies like PepsiCo are under extraordinary pressure to make healthier foods. Kellogg has cut as much as 30 percent of the sugar in children’s cereals like Apple Jacks and Froot Loops, removed salt from others and increased fiber. Taco Bell last month announced a new Power Protein menu that will

include items with less fat and calories, and other companies are rushing to get their products in shape.

“We’re not only thinking about making great-tasting foods but about the nutrition guidelines we need to deliver on,” said Greg Creed, chief executive of Taco Bell, referring to the company’s pledge to bring one-third of the meal options in its restaurants into compliance with the federal dietary guidelines by 2020. “This is a huge change in mind-set.”

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