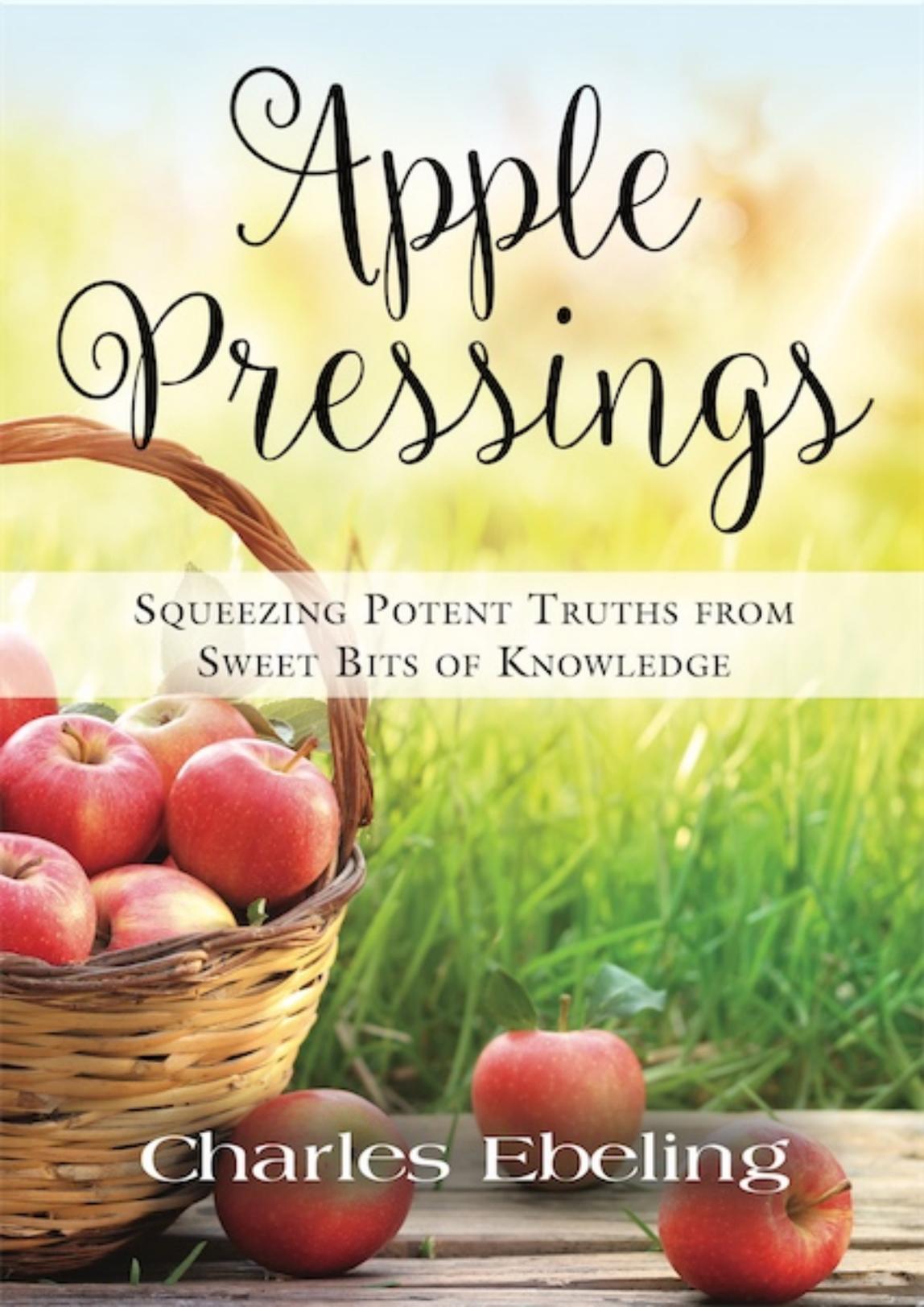


Apple Pressings is a book of essays that "Squeezes Potent Truths from Sweet Bits of Knowledge". It is an anthology of 15 essays, presented one per year, from 2005 through 2019 to the Chicago Literary Club, one of the oldest such organizations. Each is the product of research, travel and mostly, life experiences of the author, Chuck Ebeling.

APPLE PRESSINGS:
Squeezing Potent Truths
from Sweet Bits of Knowledge
by Charles Ebeling

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Apple Pressings

SQUEEZING POTENT TRUTHS FROM
SWEET BITS OF KNOWLEDGE

Charles Ebeling

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**Always do what is right. It will gratify half of mankind,
and astound the rest.**

—Mark Twain

CHAPTER 1

FRENCH FRIED: FROM MONTICELLO TO THE MOON

A Social, Political and Cultural Appreciation of the French Fry

October 31, 2005

Backstory: Even though I was a corporate spokesperson for McDonald's, one of the best-known global brands, I had never taken time to learn much about the history of French fries, so I set out to correct that. And, in retirement, I now had the time to do it. Hence, my first essay for the Chicago Literary Club. Here, you'll learn why the first "f" in french fries is often lower case.

This Halloween night's essay is, perhaps disappointingly, not one about skulls and bones and things that moan in the night. And I hope it's not received that way either! My topic is about one of those little things that we so often take for granted, yet one of those many small presences that make the world go 'round, and that add some of the color, flavor and zest, if not romance, to our everyday world.

What follows is a social, political and cultural appreciation of that humble, crisp, vilified, salty, glorious and slivered bit of teased and fried tuber that is called – at least on occasion when Congress is not in a snit of geopolitical retaliation – the french fry.

As the old saying goes, it's not wise to go grocery shopping on an empty stomach. So now that our appetites are in check, let's enter the big wide world of that very tiny, yet surprisingly powerful influence on human life. This story is both part personal journey and part research, with a dash of whimsy thrown in for good measure. It is a personal journey in that, for years, my curriculum vitae began with this sentence: "Chuck has loved McDonald's french fries since he was a teenager and has been talking about them ever since." And yes, my McDonald's corporate bio really opened that way.

Indeed my first memory of french fries was from the time when I was 15, hanging out with some of my buddies on a bench at the new McDonald's in LaGrange – one of the early ones in the chain – munching bag after bag of 15 cent french fries and quaffing paper cups of orange drink, watching the girls drive through the lot, long before there was any such as thing as a drive-thru.

As my disclaimer, McDonald's – yes THAT McDonald's of Dow Jones industrial strength and french fry fame – later paid my salary, directly or indirectly, for nearly a quarter of a century, first as a Michigan Avenue public relations consultant, and later as a member of the corporate staff at, what one author calls Hamburger Central, in suburban Oak Brook, Illinois.

I retired on the cusp of the Millennium, partly because I'd decided that working in just one century was more than enough for me. Until then, I'd been serving as the corporate communications officer and chief global spokesperson for the Golden Arches. And just for the record, as a McRetiree, I no longer speak for McDonald's in any official capacity, other than as a McFan of the McBrand.

Notwithstanding all these disclaimers, I never had the time to become a true expert on much of the lore of the french fry, at least until now, as my professional interest in fries was primarily from an economic perspective, mingled with frequent and fully voluntary samplings in the corporate test

kitchens and frequent research trips to the “field.” Hence, my comment that this story is also the product of new research, primarily on the trusty internet, but including at least one field trip, this time to the legendary and quite remarkable site of the humble fried tuber’s earliest introduction to America.

It was there, at Thomas Jefferson’s home, Monticello, in historic Virginia, last June, that the tour docent confirmed to me that the adventurous farmer, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and former ambassador to France, Jefferson, had indeed brought the french fry to America in 1802. In fact, the recipe for french fries was noted in a manuscript in Jefferson’s own hand, and almost certainly came from his French chef, Honore Julien.

So tonight, I’ve brought together my professional and personal perspectives, my own culinary propensities, and new research for your after-dining pleasure, in this global appreciation of a tiny, tasty thing, called a French fry.

When I say french fry, do you envision the word ‘french’ as capitalized? If you do, you no doubt consider the french fry to be of French origin. But they don’t call them French fries in France, do they, except maybe at McDonald’s. But at your typical bistro on the left bank, they are called what? Pommes frites, the fried version of pommes de terre, literally means “fried apples.” Piled high on a sizzling platter next to a grilled steak topped with seasoned butter, we’re talking Steak Frites, right?

Ponder this, when a potato is “cut into thin lengthwise strips before cooking,” according to Webster, it is considered to have been “frenched.” The English verb “fry,” is ambiguous, and can refer both to sautéing and to deep-fat frying. The French verb it derives from refers unambiguously to deep-fat frying. Indeed, when Francophile Thomas Jefferson had his staff over at the White House serve his guests from large silver bowls of fried potatoes, prepared using a recipe he’d picked up in Paris, they became known as – riddle solved – french fries – in lower cased ‘french’.

Of course, to complicate matters, and the entomology of the French fry is indeed a bit complex, the french fry may have actually been created in a French-speaking area of southern Belgium, which however was not to become part of France until 1830. More on this puzzle later.

With this argument about capitalization and origins of the fry itself under our belts, let's consider the early origins of the potato. How the potato found its way from the South American highlands into those fry boxes at McDonald's is one adventurous story, indeed, involving Conquistadors, Marie Antoinette, Thomas Jefferson, of course, and a pair of entrepreneurial brothers named Dick and Mac McDonald.

Down in Peru, the Inca Indians were the first people known to have cultivated potatoes, as early as 750 BC. They had many uses for potatoes, which ranged in size from a small nut to an apple, and in color from red and gold to blue and black. They didn't fry them, but they did worship them, and even measured time with them, correlating units of time to how long it took to grow a potato crop. The Spanish conquistadores came across the knobby little tubers they called "truffles" in the high Andean village of Sorocota. In 1533, Pedro de Leon discovered they prevented "scurvy," and finding they remained fresh longer at sea than did limes, the potato quickly became standard issue to the crews of Spanish and English ships. That's how what the Spanish came to call the "edible stone," arrived in Europe.

In 1596, Sir Francis Drake sailed for home after defeating some Spanish in the Caribbean, grabbed some potatoes for the trip, and welcomed aboard a human cargo of homesick colonials in Virginia. One of these passengers handed a potato to a horticulturist in England, who dubbed it a Virginia potato. In Germany, there is a monument to the potato with the inscription, "To God and Sir Francis Drake, who brought to Europe for the everlasting benefit of the poor – the potato." But it was not until the next century that the potato would actually gain a footing in Virginia.

Being a member of the nightshade family, superstitions in Europe categorized the potato as evil and poisonous, and even as a dangerous aphrodisiac. But then entered King Frederick William of Germany, where the tuber was considered only suitable for livestock and prisoners. As a deterrent to famine, the king took up the cause and ordered peasants to grow and eat it – or have their noses cut off. Ouch!

France's Antoine Parmentier helped King Louis XIV popularize the potato in France. Parmentier, in a burst of public relations genius, created a feast with only potato dishes, a concept he found possible while imprisoned in Germany and fed only potatoes.

This 1767 dinner – a potato-eating extravaganza – was attended by another American Francophile, Benjamin Franklin, and Marie Antoinette, wearing potato blossoms in her hair. The feast even included a potato liqueur. Master promoter Parmentier proceeded to plant an acre of potatoes in the countryside, with highly visible armed guards during day, as if the potato field were highly valuable. But, cleverly, he had it left unsupervised at night. Peasants soon concluded that the potatoes were highly prized, so they stole them, planted them in their own fields and soon the potato became a staple throughout France. Then it proceeded to gain acceptance throughout Scotland, Holland, Austria, Switzerland, Germany and Italy.

Potatoes even led to a war. In 1778, Prussia and Austria fought a war by trying to starve each other's army by consuming their food source, mostly potatoes. It became known as the Potato War.

It took none other than Sir Walter Raleigh to bring the potato to Ireland, when Queen Elizabeth I granted him 40,000 acres there to grow potatoes and tobacco. In 1733, an English seeds man summed up popular opinion of the potato this way: "it shall henceforth be reckoned as a food fit only for Irishmen and clowns." As a side note, do you know why the potato is sometimes called a "spud?" The name came from the type of spade the Irish used for digging potatoes.

It is odd to think that Sir Walter Raleigh's contribution to the explosion of potato growing in Ireland was what led indirectly to the ultimate immigration of many Irish to America, when the potato blight hit in 1845, and a million Irish starved. The Irish had previously suffered from inadequate food supplies, so had readily adopted the tuber, which grew well in their climate until the potato famine set in. Only today is new DNA research on dried potato blossoms from that time, which had been preserved at Kew gardens, promising to identify the disease that caused the deadly potato blight.

The potato itself made the trip to America a bit earlier, when in 1762, the governor of Bermuda sent two large cedar chests containing potatoes and other vegetables to Frances Wyatt, governor of Virginia at Jamestown. Today, the potato is grown in every state and in about 125 countries worldwide.

But, from whence comes the french fry? Notwithstanding Jefferson's introduction of the treat to America, the French and the Belgians still debate who created it first. Expert opinions are divided, but by the 1830's deep fried potatoes were a taste sensation in both countries. Recipes for fried potatoes in French cookbooks go back at least to 1755. The first reference to french fries in English appeared in O. Henry's book "Rolling Stones" in 1894. He wrote: "Our countries are great friends. We have given you Lafayette and french fried potatoes." Yet, when the controversy over Freedom Fries began, in 2003, as part of a Republican protest against France's opposition to the war on Iraq, the French embassy claimed that the food was actually Belgian in origin.

Belgium itself lays claim as the originator of french fries, partly based on reference to poor inhabitants of an area of the Meuse valley near Liege, Belgium. They often accompanied their meals with small fried fish, but when the river froze and they couldn't fish, they cut potatoes lengthwise the same size as their favorite little fish and fried them in oil. Even more proof arises to foster their claim in that a Belgian named Frits opened a stand selling fries in 1871, giving his own name to the product, which is

the French name for the dish in Belgium to this day. Some four thousand such friekot or friture stands appear everywhere in Belgium. There, Belgium fries, made with Belgium Bintje potatoes, cooked twice and served in paper cones, are traditionally enjoyed with tangy mayonnaise rather than catsup. Today, a growing number of Belgium fry shacks or frietkots are to be found in the U.S., mostly in New York and the northeast.

Then there are the Spanish. They once controlled the area that is now Belgium and claim that the recipe for french fries first appeared in Galicia, where it was served as an accompaniment to fish dishes. From there they say it traveled aboard Spanish galleons to Belgium.

Well, to bring it back home to the USA, how did the contemporary ubiquitous french fry ever become so popular among the masses over here, given its early and elite domestic launch by Thomas Jefferson?

At the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904, a potter from Athens, Texas named Fletcher Davis, who wasn't selling enough pottery back home, opened a lunch counter. He served potato strips there, an idea from a friend back in Paris, Texas. But a reporter thought he'd said "Paris, France," and thus another legend took root regarding the origin of the name.

French fries really took off in America after World War I, when thousands of hungry soldiers returning from stations in Northern France and Belgium, demanded them. It was "over there" that the "Doughboys" were introduced to the tasty fries.

Today, less than one hundred years later, more than 7 Billion pounds of french fries are served in America alone each year. Some 140 pounds of potatoes are consumed per person, including 50 pounds of french fries, and that's just half of what the typical European consumes. Potatoes have become the world's fourth largest food staple, after wheat, corn and rice. And just as Steak Frites is a dish synonymous with French cuisine, today's "hamburger and fries" is shorthand for all things American.

May I make a brief diversion to the history of the ubiquitous hamburger? As you might guess, the hamburger traces its roots back to the great port city of Hamburg, Germany, where it was thought to have arrived from the eastern ports of the Baltic Provinces, as a spiced dish of raw shredded beef, “Steak Tartare.” Before that, it’s believed that nomads on the Russian Steppes developed a taste for a dish of such raw spiced chopped meat, wrapped and tenderized beneath their saddles as they rode.

It was from Hamburg, that German sailors carried their favorite meat loaf-like patty, now grilled, over to the states in the 1800’s. In 1974, shortly after I became a public relations consultant to McDonald’s, I received an international phone call from the advertising agency for McDonald’s in Germany, which was about to open up the large Hamburg market, and was looking for PR ideas. I thought a bit, and reflected on that hamburger history, and suggested their theme be “the hamburger returns to Hamburg.” When McDonald’s opened in Hamburg, the idea became an enormous hit with the local folks – those original Hamburgers.

That same Fletcher Davis, who was selling french fries at the 1904 World’s Fair, also brought along to the fair his recipe for a ground-beef patty served between slices of home-made bread. The ground beef sandwich was named the hamburger, as recognized by some visitors of German descent, and the rest, as they say, became history. Of course, there are other legends of the hamburger’s origin, one dating to 1885 in Seymour, Wisconsin, which is also home the Hamburger Hall of Fame, and another to 1895 in a Yale off-campus eatery called Louie’s Lunch.

Hamburgers have come a long way since then. Are any of you familiar with the Economist magazine’s Big Mac Index to explain international exchange rates? The Economist’s website explains it this way, “Burgernomics is based on the theory of purchasing price parity, the notion that a dollar should buy the same amount in all currencies.” In their shopping basket lies a single McDonald’s Big Mac hamburger, a fast food staple available in 120 countries. The Big Mac purchasing-power parity

is the exchange rate that would mean hamburgers cost the same in America as abroad.

When I first heard of the Economist's desire to create the index, I and my associates at McDonald's thought they were crazy, because the index would be vulnerable to criticism for ignoring price variables such as taxes, profit margins, and the cost of non-tradable goods and services. Economist editor, Pam Woodall, commented that, "If you were to look at this from a purely economic point of view, there are reasons why the Big Mac Index is a flawed measure of purchasing price parity. But what is curious is that it is actually a good predictor over time. If more investors believed in our index, they'd be a lot richer today," Woodall concluded.

More recently, a major wire service published results of research in the form of a question: "What is America's biggest selling food: hamburger, french fries or pizza?" The answer: french fries are served with 22% of all restaurant meals, and hamburgers with 17% of all meals in restaurants.

French fries have been a secret of economic success all right, evidence McDonald's. Here's a quote on how important french fries were to his building of McDonald's into the world's largest food service organization, from Ray Kroc's autobiography, "Grinding it Out." "Now, to most people, a french-fried potato is a pretty uninspiring object...just something to kill time chewing between bites of hamburger and swallows of milk shake. That's your ordinary fry. The McDonald's brother's french fry was in an entirely different league. They lavished attention on it. I didn't know it then, but one day I would, too. The french fry would become almost sacrosanct to me, its preparation a ritual to be followed religiously."

McDonald's recipe for fries, like the finest gourmet french fry recipes, call for the classic Russet Burbank Idaho potato to be twice fried. Julia Child once called McDonald's french fries the finest in the world. McDonald's fries are the product of continuous research. According to former Business Week Chicago Bureau Chief, Jack Love, who wrote the

definitive McDonald's history, "Behind the Arches," "The fabled McDonald's french fries were no accident." He concludes that fries "gave McDonald's its most definitive product differentiation...and some say fries were even more important in building McDonald's than the hamburger itself."

Today's french fry is something of a wonder. Luther Burbank, the father of the Idaho french fry potato, lived from 1849 to 1926, and became, with just an elementary education, one of history's most inventive and productive breeders of plants. He conducted as many as three thousand experiments at once, painstakingly crossbreeding foreign and native species of plants, cultivating the resulting seedlings, and using grafting to arrive at new and better breeds. A hundred years after their invention his breeds of peach, plum and nectarine, to name a few, are still on the market.

But his greatest success was the Russet Burbank potato of 1871, better known as the Idaho potato. This was soon exported to help Ireland recover from the devastating potato blight of 1840-60. Even today, despite all the horticulturists who followed, Burbank's large, hardy, fine-grained potato is unsurpassed and a staple of agriculture.

Speaking of the popularity of hamburgers and fries, the topic of nomenclature is unavoidable. I previously mentioned the 2003 flare-up that led the House of Representatives cafeteria to rename french fries as Freedom Fries, and French Toast as Freedom Toast. In fact, this silliness has come up before. As part of the anti-German sentiment during world War I, sauerkraut was renamed liberty cabbage and hamburgers became liberty steaks. Even German measles fell to this "sick" game, becoming liberty measles. In World War II the frankfurter bowed out to the hot dog, and although frankfurter is still recognized, it is not in common use.

Other similar examples include filete imperial (or "imperial beef") in Spain, replacing filete russo (or "Russian beef"), after the triumph of the anti-communist General Franco, and kafe elliniko (or "Greek coffee") replacing kafe turiko (or "Turkish coffee") on Greek menus after the

Turkish-Greek collisions of the 1920's. So beware, Spaghetti Bolognese could become noodles with hamburger – the next time we cross with the Italians.

More on french fry nomenclature: In a quick trip around the world, the ever-present fry is called many things. In Brazil, it's batata frita; in French Canada, it's patatas fritas; in Chinese Mandarin, it's Shu Tiao (Shu for potato and Tiao for stripe or stick); in Denmark, it's pomfritter, in Israel it's tuganim; in Ireland – it's chips, not be confused with crisps, which are really potato chips; in Mexico, it's papas a la Francesca; in Poland, it's frytki; in Swedish slang, it's strips; and in Thailand, it's man fa rang tod, meaning potato fries, and in Japan, a familiar-sounding furaido poteeto.

Back in the U.S., we have many names for fry variations, most descriptive and some of which you'll recognize from your own background: there are slim shoestring or matchstick fries, crinkle or waffle cuts, hearty cottage fries or thick steak house fries (often with the skin on) , and concertina or curly fries. Then there are seasoned fries made with breading and spices, and even Burger king's new turnabout on fried chicken called Chicken Fries, which are pseudo fries: thin strips of fried chicken served in a french fry-type box.

Then there are tasty nationalistic variations: in Quebec and New Brunswick, fries are the main component of a dish called poutine, a mixture of french fries with fresh cheddar cheese curds, covered with hot gravy. In the Netherlands, they like satay peanut sauce with their fries. Speaking of fries going global, a book, by Canadian George Cohon, on opening up the Russian market to McDonald's is titled: "To Russia With Fries," and includes a forward by Mikhail Gorbachev.

Back in the U.S., in Utah and surrounding areas, french fries are often served with fry sauce that is a mixture of spices, mayonnaise and ketchup, and in many areas of our country, good old messy cheese fries are popular with the younger generation.

Speaking of messes, we've already looked at some of the international debates that have ranged around issues about the nationality of fries, so let's dive a little further into some of the other issues that have been associated with the friendly French fry.

One of my favorite political photos hangs in the office of my successor at McDonald's, Walt Riker. It's a picture of Bill Clinton receiving the traditional welcome of new President's by the Senate leadership. There, in the Senate dining room, sits Democrat Clinton holding out a box of McDonald's fries, surrounded by arch Republican, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole and fellow senators. Walt was then Dole's press secretary and came up with the idea of warming up that first meeting with Clinton by serving him the kind of egalitarian fast food lunch he'd often enjoyed as a governor.

Moving slightly away from politics, to energy, have you heard of the Green Grease Machine? It was cobbled together a few years ago and is a van that runs on clean-burning biodiesel fuel made from cheap, readily available used restaurant vegetable cooking oil. That's right, French fry oil. Builders claimed the van "got 1300 miles per acre." While there's been plenty of controversy about the health issues around french fries, now there's also an upside to french fry oil – it could help solve the growing energy shortage. And, the exhaust smells like fries!

Today, after years of careful observation and experimentation, research is beginning to show that maybe we can sometimes have our fries and eat them too. Using basic principles of chemistry and engineering, scientists are finding new ways to make better fries that strike a balance among flavor, texture and nutrition. Their work could, eventually, propel french fries into a more modern version of perfection.

Some scientists have tried chemically engineered, low-fat oils such as Olestra to make healthier fries. Other researchers have been working to make edible coatings that will keep oil from penetrating the potatoes. Another idea on the table is to pack potatoes full of vitamins, through bio-engineering. And there is a promising new technique for making fries that

are good and healthy which involves infrared energy – a sort of heat lamp. By controlling the intensity to mimic the heat transfer involved in frying, it might be possible to produce more perfect fries. Meanwhile, research continues to reduce trans-fats, while expanding nutritional disclosures and extending healthy lifestyles education programs.

On a less pedantic note, maybe you saw the McDonald's commercials from last year's Super-Bowl about a supposed Lincoln fry, a french fry that seemed to contain the profile of Abraham Lincoln. The fry was marketed on Ebay and may have become the most expensive French fry of all time – it sold for \$21,600. By the way, the Lincoln fry proceeds were donated to Ronald McDonald House Charities.

On another note, this time of judicial irony, some of you may have seen that a legal case about a single French fry recently became a factor in the Congressional hearings relating to Judge John Roberts candidacy for the Supreme Court, and ultimately as Chief Justice. It was the case of Anshe Hedgepath, a 12-year old girl. She was sitting in a Washington, D.C. metro station and opened and ate a single French fry from a bag in her lap. She did this in plain view of an undercover officer, who arrested and handcuffed her, removed her shoelaces, then fingerprinted and incarcerated her for 3 hours at a police station. Her offense was eating in a metro station, for which zero tolerance applied. An adult would have received a zero-tolerance citation and paid a fine. Anshe however, as a minor, was not eligible for such a citation, so was arrested.

On appeal, Judge Roberts ruled that the arrest was legitimate. She ate that fry in obvious violation of a legitimate city ordinance, and in the clear view of a police officer. No leniency for Anshe. To Judge Robert's credit, he did sympathize that the subway policies were "foolish," but he upheld the lower court. That single fry did her in.

By now, you're probably about done in, as well. So, I'll bring this "appreciation of the french fry" to a close. But I realize I've left out, until now, one final dimension from the title of this essay, which again is –

French Fried: From Monticello to the Moon. What's this about 16rench fries and outer space, you ask? Well, in 1995, NASA and the University of Wisconsin at Madison, created a new technology with the goal of feeding astronauts on long space voyages, with a view to eventually feeding future space colonies. In October of that year, the potato became the first vegetable to be grown in outer space.

It's a funny thing, because one of my first assignments shortly after becoming a McDonald's consultant, some 30 years ago, was to help associate McDonald's image, as it approached its 30th anniversary, with the space age.

One of the fun facts we worked up in support of the premise that McDonald's menu might literally reach space one day, was to compute the number of McDonald's 16rench fries, strung end to end that it would take to reach the moon. To figure it out we sent for a box of fries and measured each one, then divided and determined the average length, and multiplied by the average mileage to the moon – a quarter million miles. If you're curious, pick up a box of fries at McDonald's, do the math, and see how close you get to 4.5 billion fries to the moon.

I'd like to take that long ladder of moon-bound french fries just one last step farther into the future, as I wrap up this voyage through history. Albert Einstein thought that perhaps the greatest challenge facing mankind is to “widen our circle of compassion” across both time and space. Our ethnic and geopolitical squabbling might pale into insignificance if our compassionate circles were wide enough, he reasoned.

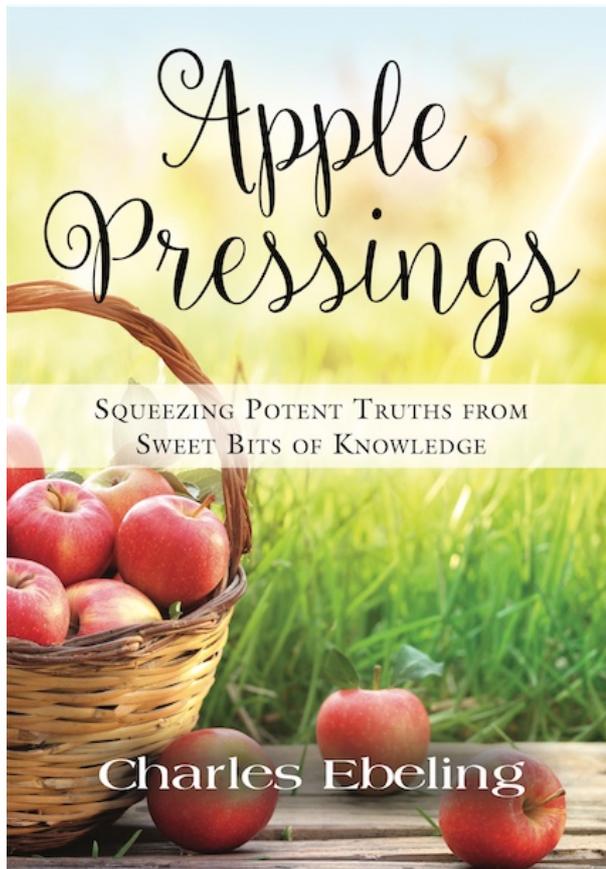
So, let's no longer worry whether the little fry is French, Belgian, American or Russian, but take it with us into the future, even into space, as a tasty treat for our frail band of wandering humanity, and continue to enjoy the good little things in life.

John Calvi, in a 1982 poem called “French Fries,” perhaps said it best, in his final stanza, when he wrote:

“Some think the army, the bombs and the guns
Will one day save all of our lives,
I don’t believe it – heat up your pans
Make peace, and lots of french fries.”

So, thanks very much for coming along on tonight’s french fried journey,
“From Monticello to the Moon.”

I wish I could have brought in some sample fries, but you know they only stay crisp for a few minutes. However, as a consolation prize, I do have a small McDonald’s gift certificate for each of you. Have a safe journey home, and no one could blame you if you stopped for some fries on the way! Happy Halloween, and goodnight.



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