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A month in McHell

By Mariko Thompson

Sunday, May 02, 2004 - When Morgan Spurlock set out to make his documentary on a 30-day binge of McDonald's burgers and fries, he laid down several ground rules. He had to eat three meals a day at McDonald's. He had to eat every item on the menu at least once. And if he was asked to super-size the meal, he had to say yes.

Because of the massive portions served in the super-size meals, the then-32-year-old filmmaker with the Fu Manchu mustache gave himself one break. He didn't have to finish the entire meal, though he does make a valiant attempt in "Super Size Me," the Sundance award-winning film opening in Los Angeles on Friday.

In one gross-out scene, Spurlock tries to force down the last of a Double Quarter Pounder, a 7-ounce carton of fries and a 42-ounce soft drink, only to vomit out the car window.

"The way I look at the film, it's a fast forward of so many people's lives," Spurlock says. "The problem is we live in a world where we can't stop eating. We're so surrounded by fast-food culture and not eating at home. We've developed a lifestyle that's feeding the obesity epidemic."

Doctors and nutritionists have clamored about immense portion sizes -- epitomized by the super-size option that McDonald's plans to phase out by year's end -- and obesity in America for several years now. With more than 60 percent of American adults considered overweight, former U.S. Surgeon Gen. David Satcher proclaimed an obesity epidemic in 2001. Last year, federal researchers announced that the health-care costs of obesity now rival those of smoking, with \$92.6 billion spent in 2002 alone.

Nationwide, the percentage of overweight children has hit an all-time high at 15 percent. Doctors report increasing numbers of children with type 2 diabetes, once called adult-onset diabetes. Obesity is a major risk factor for heart disease, hypertension and some cancers.

"It's going to really affect our health-care system," says Barbara Rolls, professor of nutritional sciences at Pennsylvania State University. "The cost is going to be unbelievable. That's gotten the attention of health-care providers."

Rolls said the obesity rates are the result of a complex interplay that includes an abundance of fatty, calorie-laden foods, lack of physical activity and overscheduled lives that have led Americans to spend nearly half of their food dollars outside of the home.

Against this backdrop, portion sizes have increased dramatically over the last three decades. ***Lisa Young***, a registered dietitian and adjunct professor of nutrition at New York University, has conducted research comparing serving sizes since the

1970s. Bagels have more than doubled in size, from a maximum of 3 ounces to a maximum of 7 ounces. One-ounce chocolate bars now have king-size 2.5-ounce versions, she says.

"It's cost effective for manufacturers to increase portion size," says Young, who was interviewed on camera for Spurlock's film. "They make more money because the food is so cheap. We as consumers think we're getting a deal, so it appears to be win-win."

In the 1950s, a single order of french fries weighed 2.4 ounces. Today, that's the small size at McDonald's, notes Young.

The problem is people eat more when larger portions are set in front of them. That's not just common sense. Rolls documented the behavior in several scientific studies. In one study, participants were served macaroni and cheese. When a double portion was offered, participants increased their consumption by 30 percent. She also found that people don't compensate for the extra calories by eating less later.

To turn the tide, consumers will have to play an active role, Rolls says. Companies do respond to consumer demand. Rather than seeking punitive measures like junk-food taxes, Rolls suggests that the government find ways to provide incentives to the food and restaurant industries.

"The issues involved are not just nutritional," Rolls says. "They're psychological. They're economic. They're very complex. And they'll require scientists, food providers and government to strategize together rather than fight."

McDonald's spokesman Bill Whitman says the company has been dedicated to doing just that. Under chief executive Jim Cantalupo, who died in April, McDonald's rolled out a line of salads and a grilled chicken sandwich. More recently, the company began promoting its "balanced lifestyles platform," a response to U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson's call for the fast-food industry to provide more healthy choices.

The new offerings include an adult Happy Meal with an entree salad, a bottle of water, a pedometer and an exercise brochure written by Oprah Winfrey's personal trainer, Bob Greene. For the children's Happy Meal, McDonald's added options such as apple slices with low-fat caramel sauce and milk in old-fashioned jug containers.

McDonald's decision to eliminate the super-size option had nothing to do with Spurlock's film, but was the result of a review of all core menu items offered at McDonald's restaurants, Whitman says.

"The notion that we'd do this in response to a movie is misguided and naive," Whitman says.

Spurlock came up with his premise after learning about the much-mocked and ultimately unsuccessful lawsuit by two teenage girls who alleged that eating McDonald's made them fat. He begins the journey by asking the question: Where does personal responsibility end and corporate responsibility begin?

To establish a baseline, Spurlock undergoes a physical exam and fitness test. At the outset, his weight, cholesterol levels and fitness are well within normal range. Over the next 30 days, as he eat McDonald's fare, he balloons by 25 pounds. His cholesterol shoots up 65 points. He also develops a condition called fatty liver, which often is found in obese patients and is a risk factor for cirrhosis.

Most of the chatter generated by the film focuses on this downward spiral. But the scope of the film isn't limited to McDonald's. "Super Size Me' is a humorous, biting and at times over-the-top examination of an American culture in denial over its co-dependence on fatty, sugary foods. Of all the pieces to the obesity puzzle, his visit to a school cafeteria most fuels his sense of outrage.

"The school lunch program is the most horrifying part of that entire film,' Spurlock says. "The food, it's like you're in a 7-Eleven -- there's pizza, soda, hot dogs and candy. I love how some of these educators who run the food services would say, 'Some of these kids, this is the only good meal they're going to get.' Well, shouldn't it be a nutritious meal? There is an obligation that we have to fulfill, and we're not.'

Once the documentary was filmed, Spurlock joined the ranks of dieting Americans. His girlfriend Alex Jamieson, a vegan chef, put him on a "detox' diet that stressed fruits and vegetables and eliminated meat, dairy, sugar and caffeine for two months. After that, he went back to his prefilm eating routine and continued to run, lift weights at the gym, and bicycle to work. At the five-month mark, he had shed 20 pounds. The last 5 pounds plagued him for nine months, until April, when he finally reached his baseline of 185 pounds.

But he still eats the occasional cheeseburger.

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