

It Doesn't Have To Be a Burger

by Fred Hobbs

Back in 1977, a St. Louis advertising manager was just another idea man and sloganeer. He had probably thought up hundreds of ideas and catch phrases in efforts to boost the sale of the products of his company. But one of those ideas put the product, if not the man, in the realm of all-time successful merchandising.

The company Dick Brans worked for was McDonald's. The featured products were hamburgers. Dick's concept was, "Why not create a meal just for kids?" And that's how he became "the father of the Happy Meal." By now, everyone from Altoona to Albania, Billings to Bangkok knows about the Happy Meal with its basic offering of a burger, fries and soft drink, with a toy or plastic cartoon character included. Recent nutritional changes have been made as an emphasis on more healthy offerings has emerged, but the Happy Meal concept is firmly established as an American original with an international embrace.

The ubiquitous nature of the product puts the term far beyond just the literal category of fast food and kiddie fun into a philosophical examination of the question: "What is your happy meal – what makes you happy?" Most of us most likely would not wish to carry the discussion that far, so let's confine the discourse to the topic of food.

My children were just beginning to develop more sophisticated tastes when the Happy Meal emerged, but later it made me happy just to watch my grandkids open the carton and grab the toy before even taking a bite of the burger.

So what if the plastic toy was broken before we left the restaurant and, of course, it doesn't have to include a burger to make it a happy meal.

As a child, I remember the numerous happy meals prepared by my mother, long before the age of the Golden Arches, before Ronald McDonald was even born. Growing up in Arkansas, mother learned to be a terrific southern cook ... fried chicken, mashed potatoes, black eyed peas, green beans with bacon bits, cornbread and pineapple upside down cake for dessert. I know that meal or variations of it always made by siblings and me very happy indeed.

The definition of a happy meal lies with the diner. While on leave in the Army, I vacationed in Rome. The proprietor of the small hotel where I stayed distinctly was *not* happy when, in an attempt to be complementary, I remarked that her spaghetti was *almost* as good as that offered at Colacci's Blue Parrot restaurant in Louisville, Colorado. (It's still there, and still serves meals that make me happy, especially the homemade red sauce.)

Persian poet and astronomer Omar Khayyan's version of a happy meal is described as "a loaf of bread, a jug of wine and thou." My wife and I took Omar's advice while on a European trip. We stopped at a neighborhood delicatessen in a small town in Switzerland and purchased the bread and wine (with a hunk of Swiss cheese thrown in.) Off the path in an emerald green

valley with the snowy Alps as a background, we spread out a blanket, uncorked the wine, broke up the bread, sliced pieces of the cheese and enjoyed a very romantic happy meal.
Unforgettable!