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I tasted french fries from 8 major fast-food chains, and the winner surprised me

Irene Jiang Jun. 2, 2019, 11:12 AM



From left: fries from Arby's, Dairy Queen, Five Guys, Wendy's, Chick-fil-A, Shake Shack, McDonald's, and Burger King. Irene Jiang / Business Insider

That's why we've pitted fries from eight fast-food chains — Arby's, Dairy Queen, Five Guys, Wendy's, Chick-fil-A, Shake Shack, McDonald's, and Burger King — against one another in a taste-test battle royale.

The rules are simple: one standard order of medium fries from each restaurant, no condiments. Fries are tasted on-site at restaurants for consistency.

The judging is based on a one-to-five scale in four categories:

1. Crispiness: Is the fry encased in a golden shell of poreless crisp, or is it limp and lifeless?
2. Flavor: A fry should taste like good potato, good oil, and good salt. Fishy flavors? Cardboard? No.
3. Mouthfeel: Smooth, gritty, chewy? Structurally sound?
4. Salt: A top score is a perfectly salted fry. Anything over or under loses points.

May the best fry win.

Despite the continuous controversy over Chick-fil-A's charity choices, its fries have their loyal fans.



Irene Jiang / Business Insider

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These waffle-shaped taters deliver the crisp you'd expect from a fried potato slice with their surface area. However, they seem to be part of the "salt is for squares" gang. And these desperately need salt to compensate for their dry, oily, cardboard-like flavor. With an overall mouthfeel that's sometimes stiff and sometimes soggy, these fries don't put up much of a fight.



Irene Jiang / Business Insider

Dairy Queen's challenger is almost as pale as its soft-serve ice cream.



Irene Jiang / Business Insider

Appearances aren't deceiving. These are mostly soft and slightly undercooked. The flavor isn't bad, but the undercooked potato tastes fishy — not the best taste for a fry. They're a little gritty and mushy, with some bounce to each bite, and also a little too salty.



Irene Jiang / Business Insider

With a taste somewhere between a McDonald's fry and a Five Guys fry, the Wendy's champion has steadfast allies.



Irene Jiang / Business Insider

Sometimes crispy, sometimes not, these fries taste kind of like earthy, real potatoes, but they definitely have some metallic, processed undertones. They're kind of pungent, a little dry, with a texture like mashed potatoes. And they're criminally undersalted.



Irene Jiang / Business Insider

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Five Guys saunters into the ring with a colossal challenger. With a reputation for using real potatoes, freshly cut and fried, Five Guys poses a substantial threat to the competition.



Irene Jiang / Business Insider

Despite their quantity and freshness, these fries are just less satisfying — they're only sort of crispy and sort of salty. Five Guys relies too heavily on the "real potato" appeal of its fry at the expense of flavor. They have a wholesome, hearty mouthfeel but are ultimately somewhat sweet and not very flavorful.



Irene Jiang / Business Insider

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McDonald's fries have always ruled over their own kingdom, at least in spirit.



Irene Jiang / Business Insider

McDonald's fries are McDonald's fries. They're pretty dang crispy, with a time-tested texture and mouthfeel that blends a chewable crunch with a soft and smooth core. Their taste is distinctive to Mickey D's: processed, oily, savory, and satisfying, with a hint of metallic. And though they're well salted on the outside, they're bland inside, sometimes mushy and sometimes dry.

Irene Jiang / Business Insider

Burger King is beloved by its subjects not for its fries, but for its outrageous style.

Irene Jiang / Business Insider

Savory, oily, and rich, BK's fries were the only contestant with zero metallic undertones. They're crispy on the outside and juicy on the inside, though their core is a little gritty and a tad bit too soft. These have just the perfect amount of salt to hit the "YUM!" factor.

Irene Jiang / Business Insider

Arby's enters the arena with the most eye-catching contestant. With curves for miles and a fiery personality, Arby's fries immediately call to mind a hot summer day at a state fair.

Irene Jiang / Business Insider

Perfectly crispy with a deep, well-rounded flavor and an ideal amount of salt, Arby's curly fries hit the spot. It's the spiciest fry on this list, standing out with its seasoning of onion, paprika, and pepper and its great sticky, starchy, mouthfeel that blends perfectly with an outer layer of crisp. Overall, a highly satisfying and addicting fry.

Irene Jiang / Business Insider

Crinkle-cut-fry skeptics are many and their voices loud, but Shake Shack's crinkle-cut fries don't care. They simply plug their ears and refuse to listen.

Irene Jiang / Business Insider

It's definitely plausible that Shake Shack had extraterrestrial help to perfect its fries. Each fry is coated in a layer of golden crisp that gives way to a

soft, welcoming interior. They hit savory and umami, with a hint of sweetness, and they taste like potatoes, oil, and just the right amount of salt. There is a slight metallic aftertaste, but the first bite is so overwhelmingly delicious that this flaw is easily forgiven.

Irene Jiang / Business Insider

In this french-fry battle royale, Shake Shack was by far the winner. With a thick layer of crisp and a succulent flavor, Shake Shack's crinkle-cut underdog is miles ahead of its competition.

Irene Jiang / Business Insider

However, Shake Shack is not without worthy challengers: Arby's and Burger King stand out, while Five Guys definitely corners the real-potato-fry market.

And taste is subjective and subject to change. A hot fry is a hot fry, and that's a sentiment that can unite a fast-food nation.

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