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BLIMPIE DEBUTS LOW-CARB MENU

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BLIMPIE DEBUT

Happily slimming meal.

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October 1, 2003 – Blimpie International will become the latest fast-food chain to join the health craze this week when it introduces a low-carb menu that features roast beef, turkey and chicken sandwiches.

Spurred by consumer demand for healthier options and the fear of obesity lawsuits, fast-food chains have made a renewed push toward salads and other low-fat fare.

Burger King recently introduced a line of low-fat sandwiches that contain 350 calories and are served on freshly baked baguettes. McDonald's has hired Bob Greene, Oprah Winfrey's personal trainer, to promote Go Active meals that contain a salad, a bottle of water and a pedometer - a device to count one's steps. Blimpie's new offerings have less than one-fifth the carbohydrates found in regular subs.

Blimpie is expected to announce the new menu items today, and introduce them Friday at 22 Long Island stores. A national rollout to Blimpie's 1,600 stores will follow, said CEO Jeffrey Endervelt.

In addition to low-carb sandwiches and salads, Blimpie will also offer Atkins Crunchers Chips (3 grams of net carbs), a brownie (5 grams of carbs) and Pepsi's SoBe Lean, a low-sugar, low-carb cranberry grapefruit drink.

Wendy's and Hardee's are testing low-carb burgers served on a bed of lettuce without the bun, analysts said. And Taco Bell has introduced a line of "Fresco" entrees that substitute salsa for cheese and high-fat sauces.

Fast-food chains have toyed with healthy meals in the past, usually to limited success, analysts said. Taco Bell's Border Light menu flopped, and McDonald's has struggled for years to sell salads.

Arlene Spiegel, a restaurant consultant, said previous attempts at healthy food might have been premature. "Now the market is ripe and ready for it," she said.

When McDonald's first added salads to its menu about a decade ago, they "weren't fresh and were treated like a second-class citizen in marketing campaigns," Spiegel continued.

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