

THE SMART SET

FROM DREXEL UNIVERSITY

Consumer Confidence

Double Trouble

By Greg Beato



The Double Down

"It's from KFC? Oh that is just so typical..."

At just 540 calories, KFC's new chicken sandwich, the **Double Down**, makes for a modest meal. Even skimpy Hollywood movie star **Megan Fox** would have to down nearly five of them each day to sustain her weight of 114 pounds. But if the sodium-drenched morsel seems more tooled for casual snacking than a serious feast, it has certainly satisfied our collective appetite for outrage and controversy. In the lead-up to and aftermath of its national debut three weeks ago, the Double Down emerged as an irresistibly mediagenic, instantly polarizing force, the junk food equivalent of Sarah Palin.

In true maverick fashion, the Double Down replaces the plainest, least indulgent part of a traditional chicken sandwich — the bun — with the most delicious part — the chicken. At first glance, this seems like a darkly comic twist on the low-carb, lettuce-wrapped burgers inspired by the Atkins Diet craze, a parody of stereotypical fast food excess that only a stoner could take seriously: "Dude! The bun is made out of meat! It's the tenderest, juiciest bun I've ever consumed!"

But ultimately the Double Down achieves its aura of excess in relatively prudent fashion. While it turns the bread part of a traditional chicken sandwich meaty, it turns the meaty part of a traditional chicken sandwich into...toppings. The two fried chicken fillets that serve as the Double Down's shell encase nothing more than two slices of bacon, two slices of cheese, and a squirt of some tasty glop that KFC has dubbed "Colonel's Sauce." Where's the beef?

Upon its unveiling, critics largely ignored the Double Down's restraint. The *Los Angeles Times* called the sandwich "alarming." The *New York Times* dubbed it a "new low." Kelly Brownell, Director of Yale's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, told *USA Today* it was a "salt bomb." The *San Francisco Chronicle* echoed such **Code Orange metaphors**, calling the Double Down a "vile meatwich crammed like a grenade with sodium, sugar, fat and chemicals." This thing, the *Village Voice* mused, was truly lethal: "Why pay one angel's hair of attention to what Michelle Obama, Jamie Oliver, and those killjoys at the American Heart Association are telling you when KFC keeps giving us moist, crunchy ways to kill ourselves, one bite at a time?"

Never mind that KFC plans to offer the Double Down for only six weeks — Colonel Sanders, widely thought to be dead but perhaps just hanging out in the rugged terrain of Pakistan, is now the greatest threat to America's long-term security.

Positioning KFC as a culinary terrorist that coerces chicken-hearted consumers into eating against their best interests makes for a savory sound bite, but it's based on faulty intelligence. Like all its fast food brethren, the chain is actually a pretty timid actor in the realm of gastronomic overindulgence. If you've ever watched the Travel Channel's *Man vs. Food* or its Food Network predecessor, *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives*, you know where the real carnage happens: At mom-and-pop establishments where the fry cooks and burger-flippers would take one look at the puny Double Down and start planning a remodel. Add a square foot or two of pastrami, throw in a pound of turkey for texture, season with a scoopful of onion rings, pull it all together with salsa, barbecue sauce, and a lot more bacon and cheese, and for God's sake, give the customer a bun — a giant ciabatta round would do nicely. Then maybe you'd have something.

At some point, America's independent diner owners realized that one way to compete against the ubiquity, convenience, and low prices of fast food was to offer portion sizes that made Big Macs look like White Castle sliders. More recently, the publicity that belly-busting travelogues like *Man vs. Food* can deliver has given restaurateurs even more incentive to treat lunch as a new kind of endurance sport. Now, it seems as if every greasy spoon in the land has followed the lead of pioneers like Amarillo's **Big Texas Steak Ranch** and Boston's **Eagle's Deli**, offering eating challenges to their customers that would make even King Kong reach for the Alka-Seltzer. Forget Wendy's Baconator Triple, the 1330-calorie weaponized burger that *The Daily Beast* has labeled the fast food world's "deadliest meal" — the true markers of recreational gluttony in America are **7-pound breakfast burritos** and **giant single-serve pizzas** topped with enough meat to populate a small zoo.

Menu items measured in pounds rather than ounces can't be manufactured at value meal price points. Breakfast burritos that are literally the size of a newborn infant take too long to make and too long to eat to qualify as fast food. But fast-food chains are in the business of entertaining us as much as they're in the business of feeding us, so they offer softcore versions of the completely uncensored fare available in the nation's independent burger

joints, delis, waffle houses, pizza parlors, and sandwich shops. And if they can't compete in terms of calories and cholesterol, they can at least try to sell the sizzle of clever marketing, like KFC's meat-as-bun ploy or IHOP's new [Pancake Stackers](#).

The latter takes a main course that has always flirted with dessert status — pancakes topped with fruit and whipped cream — and adds a heavy dollop of self-satire in the form of thick extrusions of cheesecake troweled between the pancakes. It's junk food as [press release](#), junk food as performance art, junk food as Sarah Palin [master-minding self-deprecating photo ops](#) after being mocked for [writing crib notes on her hand](#) during a Tea Party Convention earlier this year. Such fare may not do much to fulfill our daily fiber requirements, but it does provide fuel for endless Twitter quips and Facebook bon mots. These days, that's far more crucial to our health and well-being. • 7 May 2010

Greg Beato writes regularly about pop culture for Las Vegas Weekly and Reason magazine, where he is a contributing editor.

Article photo via <http://www.flickr.com/photos/sklathill/> / CC BY-NC 2.0

Copyright 2008, The Smart Set from Drexel University

