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Fred Turner

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Fred Turner (left), the man who made McDonald's, died on January 7th, aged 80

Jan 26th 2013 | From the print edition

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A TREE, wrote William Blake, moves some men to tears, but for others is merely “a green thing that stands in the way”. Similarly, for some the red and yellow livery of McDonald's is a blot on the landscape; but for Fred Turner those soaring golden arches were so lovely, so inviting, that he ordered them taken off the restaurant fascias and placed on tall signs near the roadway, where no motorist could miss them. Under the arches was displayed the number of hamburgers served, eventually reckoned in billions.

When Mr Turner became operations manager, in 1958, he had charge of just 34 restaurants. By the time he retired in 2004, having risen to CEO in 1973 and chairman in 1977, there were 31,500 restaurants worldwide, and the number of sear-sizzled beef patties in a bun with melty American cheese popped into clamshell polystyrene packs

seemed to stretch out to infinity. Indeed, even by the corporation's tenth birthday in 1965—which was also ten years since Ray Kroc, the founder (right above), had hired Mr Turner as a grillman in his very first franchise outside Chicago—McDonald's was changing the American landscape. A billion hamburgers had been sold by then, ground out from 100,000 cattle grazing the plains of Kansas or Texas. Enough flour was needed for buns to cover the whole state of Pennsylvania. Fired into orbit, those burgers would make two rings around the Earth. Thundering down again, they would fill Yankee Stadium.

This wide world of burgers was governed by Mr Turner, or rather, as he hoped everyone would call him, Fred. Few rulers were more affable, more self-effacing or more exacting. When customers strolled in under those golden arches he made sure they got just what they wanted, time after time. To begin at the beginning, McDonald's restaurants had to look attractive, brick-built and with mansard roofs. He put in lots of indoor seating, so that diners would linger, and conversely introduced the first Drive-Thru, in 1975, so that they could be served within 50 seconds without leaving their cars. Each place was spanking clean; he would visit obsessively to chew out staff for smudgy windows or litter in the parking lot, and his training videos insisted that even the pipes under the sinks should be buffed until they shone. He knew what he was talking about; he had sweated by a grill himself.

Then there was the small matter of the food on offer. In Fred's red-and-yellow universe, each hamburger had to be a perfectly consistent, reliable artefact. Ten patties could be formed from each pound of beef; not 11, and not nine. Twenty-four was the maximum number that could go on the grill at one time. The buns had to be pre-separated, which saved precious seconds of serving time, and the fries had to be precisely 0.28 inches thick. The secret sauce had to keep its familiar tang, always. All this was in Fred's Bible, the training manual he wrote; and it was taught, too, in his Hamburger University (founded in 1961 in a restaurant basement in Elk Grove, Illinois), where for three weeks managers and staff were trained to run franchises properly in every single respect, graduating at last with a degree in hamburgerology. More than 80,000 people worldwide now boast this savoury qualification.

"Quality, service and cleanliness" (QSC) was his motto. That, and a shrewd eye for gaps in the market and the next trend. Filet-O-Fish was introduced to catch Catholics on Fridays. Happy Meals, with a free plastic trinket, were brought in to make dining with

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McDonald's



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small children a sunnier experience. The Egg McMuffin (so named by his wife Patty) marked a triumphant entry in 1975 into the realm of take-out breakfast. As Americans turned away from beef, he laboured to get fried chicken right. One day in 1979 he ordered a chef to produce chunks as big as his thumb; four years later these, reconstituted and deep-fried, appeared as Chicken McNuggets. Their success was astonishing. Americans began to eat chicken differently, snacking on it like fries, and dipping it in every sauce from Creamy Ranch to Habanero Hot; McDonald's became the second-biggest seller of chicken in the world; and specially bred fowl, with extra-large breasts, tottered top-heavily round the hen-coops of Arkansas.

Ketchup in his veins

Such influence might have been a little dazzling for a college dropout from Des Moines whose main achievement, before Kroc hired him, was to crash the truck he was driving for a cookie company. But Kroc had detected greatness in him, and made him his right-hand man within three years. He saw this baby-faced young man as the son he never had: the diligent foil to his own flamboyance, and the perfect man for McDonald's. In the jargon of company old-timers, he had ketchup in his veins.

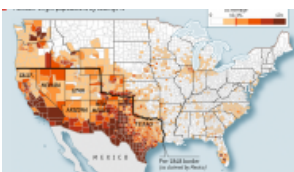
Annual revenues when he retired were \$19.1 billion. He made sure some of it was given back: on his watch he got the Ronald McDonald House Charities going, to help the families of children in hospital, and tried to present McDonald's as a benign community presence. This became harder as its restaurants spread. Obesity, pollution, cultural erosion, could all be laid by the company's many enemies at Mr Turner's door: except that to him the world of McDonald's meant fun eating, great service and the same sizzling taste, wherever the golden arches confidently stood.

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


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