

# Charlotte Haile's visit to a Chicken McNugget supplier in Wolverhampton.

## Before the visit...

I knew that Chicken McNuggets were made out of 100% breast meat. That is reassuring as a mother who is conscientious about the quality of food my daughter eats. I knew that calories and nutritional values per portion of McNuggets; these facts are available on all product packaging and labelling within McDonald's restaurants. A few of the questions that I wanted to investigate were:

***Where does the chicken come from for my child's McNuggets?  
What quality control measures are used during production?  
How are they made and how safe is the production process?  
What is in the batter mix and is it relatively healthy?***

My daughter has eaten Chicken McNuggets regularly for six years. I wanted reassurance that I was being a responsible parent by allowing her to continue enjoying them, by finding out more about the nutritional value and overall quality. More importantly, I sought confirmation that what she was eating was as safe as the meat I would purchase from a butcher or supermarket, and that I would cook at home. There have been many concerns stemming from the media surrounding meat and poultry, as a parent I just simply can't ignore them. I have to have the facts and the truth.

## The visit itself

The day was structured into:

- a) A tour of the production line.** *(I saw where the chicken breast arrives and followed the line all the way to where the McNuggets are frozen, packed into McDonald's boxes and onto the delivery lorries.)*
- b) An inspection and explanation of the raw ingredients that make a McNugget.** *(Fascinating! McNuggets are full of natural goodness,; they contain simple and healthy ingredients.)*
- c) A presentation given by the boss of the production plant and a McDonald's business manager.** *(This was an ideal opportunity to ask my questions and discuss the new information being learnt.)*
- d) A quality inspection of the McNuggets in the McDonald's kitchen.** *(Can you believe that some very lucky men spend their days testing (by tasting) every single batch of McNuggets?)*

## The McNugget Production line:

To be honest, I am almost lost for words when trying to describe the **efficiency, effectiveness and excellence** of this process. Did you know that the McNuggets are that fresh that the breast meat arrives and is then turned into a frozen, packaged McNugget in approximately four hours?

Before I entered the factory, I was appropriately suited and booted in health and safety clothing; including the essential blue hairnet, safety hat and standard green wellies. After dressing for the part came a reassuring and rigorous hygiene ritual that all undergo who enter and leave the line. (Even the wellies were disinfected.) It was explained to me that the production line is linear, in other words the chicken breast is delivered to one end of the factory and the McNuggets leave from the other - it ran like clockwork.

1. The breast meat arrives and is hygiene tested. If it passes...the meat is allowed into the factory for making into McNuggets.
2. The breast meat is put into a massive mixer. The other natural ingredients are added. These are: water, potato starch, rape seed oil, natural chicken flavouring and potassium chloride. (it is pleasing to note that McDonald's are using a healthier type of oil and a better alternative to salt.)
3. The meat is mixed to soften it enough for small children to chew it, but the natural meat fibres are still intact so that it is not pulped and shapeless.
4. The mixed meat is then taken from the mixers and put into the shaping machine, about 4m away. (did you think McNugget shapes were random like i did? Apparently not, there are four designs: the ball, the boot, the bone and the bell. Although one shape is called 'the bone', this is ironic because no chicken bones are at all likely to turn up in a McNugget.
5. The shapes move along a conveyer belt. Quality control inspectors remove any undesirable shapes. Hygiene and safety inspectors remove a selection of meat shapes to be weighed and tested at regular intervals. If the McNuggets pass...they move on...
6. Now for the battering. The meat is lightly and evenly dusted in flour specially made on the premises. They are then covered in breadcrumbs and finally battered. (the breadcrumbs and batter are also freshly made on the premises and are stringently checked before being used.) The McNugget quality and safety inspection checks are carried out again. They must pass to move on.
7. Fry those McNuggets. A low trans fat vegetable oil is used to flash fry the McNuggets. They reach a blistering temperature that destroys all harmful bacteria that may have slipped through the previous umpteenth tests. Nothing survives the big fry.
8. The McNuggets must now pass more tests. They are x-rayed. The xray machine detects any bones or other foreign nasties that may have sneaked through. The machine is so clever that it uses a series of trafficlight signals to let McNuggets move on. If they dare to fail, the McNuggets are sent out a separate hatch by the machine for dissection and scrutinous inspection.

9. The big freeze. The McNuggets are frozen. Following, can you guess, another round of quality inspection. The frozen McNuggets are moved along the conveyor belt and are counted by a machine. 50 McNuggets are then dropped into plastic bags and sealed. The bags are dropped into boxes. The boxes are weighed twice, tested and tested again. The boxes are then loaded onto pallets and onto the lorries for delivery to McDonald's restaurants..

## **The raw ingredients that make a McNugget**

Ever wondered what goes into a McNugget? Surprisingly, very little. I've often picked up children's food packaging and been amazed that the proportions of ingredients don't seem to match what I thought the product was. For example, some cottage pie ready meals. You would expect there to be meat, potato and maybe two or three extras at the most. Some children's meals that masquerade as nutritionally balanced products are actually so full of salt and other unknown additives that I wouldn't even offer them to my cat. Reassuringly, the McNugget is simple and straightforward.

I looked at the dishes laid out in front of me on my tour. They contained chicken breast meat, natural chicken flavouring, flour, batter, breadcrumbs and a healthy alternative to salt. That's it - a McNugget.

## **The presentation, question and answer session**

It was a bit like an information overload. I had facts about McNuggets whizzing around my head for at least a week after the visit. So I'm going to give you a summary of what I think are the most important findings:

### **WHERE DOES THE CHICKEN COME FROM?**

1/3 of the chicken comes from UK farms. All this chicken is then dispatched fresh from Hereford to Wolverhampton (where the factory was). 2/3 of the chicken arrives frozen from Brazil. I was initially concerned about the Brazilian chicken, but after hearing that the farms are identical to those in the UK and that the identical health and safety procedures are followed, I was reassured. The main reason for using Brazilian chicken is cost. Obviously, McDonald's is a business and has to make a profit.

### **HOW DO McDonald's GUARENTEE THE QUALITY AND SAFETY OF THEIR MCNUGGETS?**

THIS BIT IS IMPRESSIVE...From one code, McDonald's can trace not only the when the McNugget was made but also get a great deal of information about the chicken, the farm where it was raised, what grain it ate, what bedding it slept on, the parents and grandparents of the chicken and all previous safety checks (listed below). Everything, and I mean everything, is traceable. So not only do the McNuggets undergo a boot-camp quality, health and safety regime when being made, but only the best of the best chickens get to make a McNugget.

The X-ray machine mentioned earlier is a first for the chicken nugget industry. McDonald's McNuggets are the only nuggets to be x-rayed for bones etc AFTER production. In terms of safety, my opinion after the visit is that a child eating a McNugget is lower risk than a child eating a supermarket chicken meal or a butcher's chicken breast home cooked meal.

### **HOW DO McDONALD'S KEEP IMPROVING THE PRODUCTION OF MCNUGGETS?**

McDonald's evaluate their own progress constantly. They have agencies set up to inspect every farm and factory that are involved in the making of their McNuggets. Just some of these quality and safety agencies are:

McDonald's Agricultural Assurance Program (MAAP)

McDonald's Key Welfare Indicators

McDonald's Animal Welfare Audit  
McDonald's Social Accountability  
Feed mill inspectors  
THE LIST GOES ON...

## **ARE THE PEOPLE INVOLVED IN MAKING THE MCNUGGETS HEALTH AND SAFETY CONSCIOUS?**

Before anyone is allowed to work making McNuggets they must take and pass a Basic Food Hygiene certificate; most employees have passed the Intermediate and Advanced certificates too. There is an eight hour intensive training day before they can go into the factory. Once they start, they are supervised all of the time for the first 4 weeks. On top of that, the first 3 months are spent learning even more about safety and hygiene. The employees also enjoy working in the factory. This is shown by the number of people who leave or move on to other jobs - nearly ALL the staff stay at the factory I visited. The evidence speaks for itself.

### **Testing the Finished Product**

I don't know about other mums and dads, but I rarely get the opportunity to eat more than one or two McNuggets at a time, and that's if I'm lucky. I get what Jade leaves. Well this was the BEST part of the day for me. I got to learn about the job of the McNugget inspectors. They have a special McDonald's testing and tasting kitchen in the factory. Every batch of McNuggets is checked for appearance, quality of batter, quality of meat and overall taste. I got to test 6 golden McNuggets. They were perfect to my untrained palate. The inspectors graded them as nearly perfect. These guys do really enjoy their jobs - it made me want a career change. They even eat breakfast before work.