

As Written by Morgan Wesson/ Daily Messenger – Feb 27, 2006

GREASE IS THE WORD

The French brothers don't agree of cars: "We fight!" laughed Steve French. He and brother Bryan both drive economy cars, but Steve's is the one that sometimes smells like french fries.

Steve teases Bryan about the \$26,000 Prius hybrid he drives. Bryan teases Steve about burning recycled vegetable oil in his \$21,000 diesel Jetta wagon.

Although 190,000 Americans now drive hybrid cars, the rage in fuel-efficient transportation another grassroots army is growing out here in the automotive hinterlands: diesel car owners. They worship inventor Rudolph Diesel, whose first combustion engines ran on vegetable oil, not fossil fuels.

So there is a sub sect of purists among the dieselers who follow suit. They hand out at restaurants and diners, out back between the kitchen door and the dumpster. They salvage, filter and then burn discarded restaurant vegetable oil for nothing in their cars' converted diesel engines.

Sure, this fuel is free, sniff hybrid owners, but don't the veggie burners have a life? "Basically, to have to go someplace, get the oil, filter it, it's a hassle" said Bryan French.

The first to jury-rig a modern diesel for recycled vegetable oil was counterculture hero Josh Tickell, whose latest book, "Biodiesel America" hits the stands this spring. In 1990 Tickell ran his converted van across America on recycled vegetable oil and got written up in Mother Earth News.

"He was the first one," said Mark Wienand, a music major at Ithaca College who, soon after hearing Tickell's odyssey, converted his VW diesel to vegetable oil and drove it to the Great Divide.

Flash forward to 2006, Wienand, to supplement his career as a saxophonist, has so far converted 35 cars and trucks to vegetable oil, including Steve French's diesel Jetta, plus other VWs, Mercedes, and light diesel trucks sold by Dodge, Chevy and Ford.

New companies selling after-market kits are sprouting up to supply guys like Wienand - Veg Powered Systems, Greasecar.com, and Frybrid to name just three. Wienand uses Greasecar's kit.

Cruising on Crisco

In addition to Toyota, Ford/Mercury and Honda also sell fuel-sipping hybrids. Honda has America's highest-mileage car, the two-seat Insight, but is covering all fronts with a diesel Accord wagon awaiting a 2008 release.

The French brothers cars both get great mileage: 44mpg for Steve's VW Jetta diesel wagon and 47 mpg for Bryan's Prius hybrid hatchback. The Toyota hybrid uses batteries and electric motors to assist its gas engine, pollutes much less, and gets better gas mileage than Toyota's conventional cars.

Bryan is an adjunct professor who teaches JAVA programming at the Rochester Institute

of Technology; Steve is a youth counselor. Bryan typically pay 20 cents a gallon less for regular gas that Steve pays for conventional diesel.

Steve drives 30,000 miles a year and, before the conversion, was running a fuel tab over \$1800 annually with diesel fuel at \$2.69 a gallon.

Last fall, Steve's Greasecar conversion kit was installed by Mark Wienand, parts and labor for \$2,000. The kit consists of heated fuel lines and filters, a fuel tank that fits where his spare tire used to be, switching and monitoring gear plus fuel-filtering equipment.

Wienand will sell Steve filtered vegetable oil for \$1/25 a gallon. But Steve gets used vegetable oil at Top Shelf Pizza in Honeoye instead.

There is a problem with Steve French's veggie oil car, through Frybrid's more expensive kits claims to solve it: If French forgets to switch back to conventional diesel fuel close to home, and his car cools with vegetable oil in the engine, things can come to a sputtering halt.

Anyone who cooks with oil and leaves it overnight on the stove knows what happen to really cold vegetable oil.

Volkswagen of America doesn't not cover straight vegetable oil yet in engines under warranty. Most veggie-oil burners are older cars off warranty already. The company allows its diesel cars, no longer sold new in New York State due to emissions laws, to run B5 (5% vegetable oil) biodiesel. B5 will run fine without a conversion, "but we must stress that vehicle damage that results from misfueling or from usage of a substandard or unapproved fuels cannot be covered under our vehicle warranties" wrote VW late in 2005.

Meanwhile, last week's issue of the trade journal Automotive News, Volkswagen AG chief Wolfgang Bernhard jumped on the ethanol bandwagon, talking up a new kind of engine to run ethanol fuel. A new ethanol developed by Shell and Iogen, a Canadian biotech firm, along with VW could come from surplus wood products and grasses to the tune of 50 billion gallons annually. American consume 140 billion gallons of gas each year.

Getting One

Hybrid buyers this year can get tax writeoffs between \$250 and \$3,150, with the largest subsidies going to the highest mileage cars. Resale value is average so far for hybrids, despite the cost of replacement batteries. Buyers face delays and price bumps to get the popular cars, though Honda dealers report few backlogs for hybrids.