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Hold the Special Sauce? Custom-Made Burgers Come to McDonald's

By [Venessa Wong](#) November 19, 2013

McDonald's ([MCD](#)), a company that pioneered uniform, assembly-line hamburgers, is now experimenting with a somewhat antithetical concept: Custom-made burgers. The chain is currently testing them in Laguna Niguel, Calif., where diners [make selections on an iPad \(AAPL\)](#); the burgers [cost more than Big Macs](#), are grilled-to-order, and come with a choice of more than 20 toppings and sauces. The beef patty isn't cooked until you order, so the sandwich requires extra time to prepare.

It's a head-scratching departure from the burger-factory model that has allowed the chain to serve food quickly, inexpensively, and profitably. "It goes against what they stand for: speed, convenience, price, and value," says Darren Tristano, an executive vice president at food industry consultancy [Technomic](#).

On the other hand, McDonald's isn't exactly killing it lately. Same-store sales have slowed in the U.S. (They were up only 0.7 percent last quarter and slowed to 0.2 percent in October.) That's not all: The chain has been plagued by complaints of slow service and inaccurate order responses. In response, McDonald's has tried to [pare its sprawling menu](#) and will [redesign its drive-thrus](#) next year to shorten waiting times.

A widespread introduction of custom-made burgers wouldn't help these issues. What it might do, though, is help the chain stay relevant as consumers—twentysomethings in particular—express interest in customization, Tristano says.

McDonald's spokeswoman Lisa McComb said in an e-mail that it's too early to comment on the custom-made burgers, although the test will offer valuable consumer insights. "With these tests, we will have an opportunity to hear directly from our customers in real-time on what they expect from McDonald's in terms of the overall restaurant experience and their ability to further customize their menu choices," she said. Even if McDonald's doesn't go down the Chipotle ([CMG](#)) road, letting customers say what they want on their burgers—"Hey, everyone really likes burgers with guacamole!"—could shape menus in the future.

While the option to customize could help McDonald's look less like a mechanized food factory, Tristano says most customers would probably continue ordering from the regular menu. "It's more of a promotion, and marketing, and trying to change its brand image," he says. Even as McDonald's expands its premium offerings, its bigger promise to customers is still speed and price.



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