

The New York Times

About New York; And He Can Get His Oil Changed At Any Grocer's

Louis Wichinsky was telling the story of his life while driving around the city in a 1980 Volkswagen Rabbit pickup truck that he had adapted to run on vegetable oil, a fuel that gave off fumes that made Mr. Wichinsky smell like a french fry. "Anybody that goes along with an inventor is a virtual nut," he was saying as the odors one associates with short-order cooking swirled roundabout his creation. Accelerating to 50 miles an hour down the West Side Highway, the car coughed out the distinct aroma of doughnuts.

"When that switch is up, you're on vegetable," he said, pointing to a little red toggle on the dashboard that was definitely up. "We're using soybean right now. I got 45 gallons of it from Woodridge Kosher Bakery, Woodridge, N.Y. It had been frozen, turned into margarine, but after thawing it seems to work well enough."

Mr. Wichinsky owns a strong resemblance to Mel Brooks, and he talks like Mel Brooks, and anyone fortunate enough to ride around with him in his sporty veg-a-matic will have a hard time shaking the sensation that they are stuck in a Mel Brooks movie, one of the madder ones. "I'm getting a license plate that says, 'Deep Fry,'" he said.

He downshifted, the engine gave a modest burp, then hummed along contentedly through midtown.

"Vegetable oil is not new by any means.

Mr. Rudolph Diesel had found it successful with the exception of a coagulant being formed which found its way into the crankcase lubricants, thereby causing bearing failure. He later on went to whale oil, but the cost was prohibitive. Coal dust did work but damned near blew his head off.

"I also encountered a near catastrophe with a beautiful Mercedes 220D which now rests at Fast Eddie's Auto Wreckers in Monticello. The vegetable oil burned up the interior. The methanol got away from me. You got to get a picture of that. It affected my hearing."

Mr. Wichinsky paused long enough here to entertain a suggestion that he attempt the particulars of his life in some sort of linear fashion, rather than scattershot, as he seemed to favor. If he could have done it, it would have come out this way: Born 69 years ago in



Hurleyville, N.Y., son of a baker. Nothing much of consequence happened until 1942, when he was in England with the Army Air Forces and the Red Cross arranged for him to spend the Jewish holidays with Dave and Sam Wolinsky, two brothers who owned a bakery in London. "Let me tell you, every once in a while I give them a nice piece of change, the Red Cross. I like the Red Cross." To this day Mr. Wichinsky quotes the challenge Sam Wolinsky put before him. "Louis, you Yanks can do anything. How come you can't build a bagel machine?"

Mr. Wichinsky tinkered and tinkered. He tinkered with a bagel machine after the war when he was an aircraft mechanic in Israel. The lack of high gluten flour stymied him there. He was still tinkering with a bagel machine when he was back in Hurleyville, married, a father, a vending machine mechanic. Finally, 22 years ago, he succeeded, only to find that a man named Louis Gender was awarded a patent for the same machine in 1904. Nevertheless, on the strength of one difference in the two inventions, a kneading plate, Mr. Wichinsky got his own patent and set to work proving to the world he could turn out 600 dozen bagels an hour.

"If General Custer had one of my machines at Little Big Horn, shooting raw bagels, nobody would have ever heard of Sitting Bull. A rifle don't fire that fast."

One invention just naturally seemed to lead to others, to the point where now you have Mr. Wichinsky roaring around town on the cusp of a tank full of vegetable oil. And like the bagel machine, his alternatively fueled vehicle has antecedents. Engineers throughout the republic have had cars running on everything but love for some time, but apparently none so far has proved worthy of mass production. Mr. Wichinsky doesn't know yet whether his own modification is a major breakthrough, either. All he knows is that his VW made it the 100 miles from Hurleyville to New York City the other day, and that he has in mind a test drive to Las Vegas, stopping to fuel the car at Burger Kings along the way.

Just before setting off for home, in a fragrant cloud reminiscent of the back of a diner, he said he was comfortable and didn't need any more money. No, he said, he was after big fish now, not income. If the United States could grow its own fuel - soybeans, peanuts, whatever - that in itself might bring peace to the Middle East. But even if his own alternative didn't work, Mr. Wichinsky said, offering a firm, warm, greasy handshake, "the psychological repercussions it could have might bring a couple of nations to think."

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