

They cook up their own fuel

Enterprising individuals take restaurants' used frying oil to manufacture biodiesel

By **DANIELLE T. FURFARO**, Staff writer
Tuesday, November 1, 2005

Sitting at a traffic light, you suddenly get a strong whiff of french fries. Yet there isn't a burger joint in sight.

That smell could be coming out of the car in front of you.

A small but inventive minority in the Capital Region are taking themselves off the gasoline grid, choosing instead to produce their own biodiesel to power their cars or heat their homes.

"It's better for the environment and it makes use of waste," said Stephen LeBlanc of Argyle. "It's something I feel like I have to be doing."

Homemade biodiesel can be made by mixing used frying oil with methanol and heating it. While this might sound like a bathtub-gin type of operation, it involves monitoring the mixture for acidity so that it will produce the most efficient fuel.

"There is definitely science involved in it," said LeBlanc, 30, who has been making his own fuel for four years. "As I've gone along, I've gotten better at it."

After all of the materials and processing are figured in, the biodiesel costs about 60 cents a gallon to produce.

Most people who make their own biodiesel have arrangements with restaurants to take their used oil away, which most business owners are happy to do, since restaurants typically have to pay someone to haul away their oil and properly dispose of it.

The fuel cannot be used in unleaded gasoline cars, but can be used for diesel vehicles such as some Mercedes, Volvos and Volkswagens.

Any car can also be retrofitted to use regular, unadulterated fry oil as its fuel source. But there can be disadvantages to doing it that way, since the driver cannot simply revert to store-bought diesel if they are on a long trip and run out.

Juan Duran of New Baltimore spent a few days this summer building his own biodiesel processor out of tanks, hoses and electric pumps. When he was done, he put it on wheels. Now, he plans to offer the fuel to senior citizens who would otherwise have trouble getting their homes heated this winter.

"I cannot see someone freezing to death because the damn politicians are raising the prices," said Duran, who added that his processor cost him about \$4,000 to make. "I am offering it to the senior citizens, but they have to prove to me that they can't afford their own."

Jules Dervaes of Pasadena, Calif., has been making his own fuel for more than two years. Now, he has the information on his Web site, Path to Freedom, in the hopes that other people will jump on the bandwagon. So far, he said, he's gotten interest from all over the world, including people in India, Vietnam and Nigeria. The Web site, which carries the slogan "All we are saying is give grease a chance," gets more than 2,000 visitors a day.

"We like it because it makes us independent and we feel empowered if we can take something that is going to be thrown away and make treasure out of trash," said Dervaes, 57, who added that there are also political reasons. "We thought it was patriotic to be independent. We don't need to be dependent on terrorists."

Joanne Coons makes biodiesel in her home to power her family's three cars. She admits that the process can be dirty and time-consuming, but she said she feels it is worth it.

"I just want people to know there are alternatives, that we don't have to do what we are told and be gas guzzlers," said Coons, a science teacher at Shenendehowa High School.