CHEAP — AND NASTY

You could get cancer from the used oil sold on city streets

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TOXIC used cooking oil is being sold on Joburg’s streets for as little as R6 a litre.

Although it is illegal, corner cafes and fast-food outlets are selling the dangerous oil, which experts say is poisonous and can cause cancer, heart disease and other illnesses because it breaks down chemically into compounds that resemble wood varnish every time it is heated.

Those who sell, buy, and eat the stuff are putting themselves at risk, as the oil can cause cancer.

This week, Metro paid R29 for a five-litre bottle of used cooking oil from Thom’s Cafe, a takeaway in Booyens, South Joburg.

The cafe sells used oil, reheated many times and used to fry fish, to fast-food vendors and poor householders from Soweto to Vlakfontein.

Under the Foodstuffs,Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act, it is illegal to use such poor quality oil in restaurants. However, the Health Department does not tell Metro what penalties are in place regarding the sale of used oil to the public.

The man wanted was sent to Free State University Professor Lodewyk Kock for testing. He has researched the use of “used oil” for 12 years.

Kock found that:

• The oil was highly chemically degraded.
• One more heating of the oil would render it dangerous to those who consumed it, and
• That the use of the oil could make progressive illnesses worse if consumed by anyone infected by HIV.

The owner of Thom’s Cafe, known only as Ronie to his customers, refused to tell Metro why he was selling the stuff.

He said, “Sorry, no comment,” and hung up the hook.

Kock’s research led to the introduction of regulations relating to used oil in 1996.

But it is still a huge problem.

One in eight restaurants in the country still use the oil until it is unhealthy, and Gauteng is one in five,” he said.

Kock said although it was not known exactly how many restaurants and takeaways in the province were using used oil, he did say Gauteng was a hotspot.

In the townships, they call it fish oil because of the fishy taste, and people think this makes it have a higher nutritional value than new oil. But a dark, smoky and greasy smell show that the oil is not fit for use, he said.

But Thom’s Cafe’s customers don’t think so.

Duduzile Gumede, who sells food near Soweto’s Orlando Station, says it’s cheaper to buy used oil. “My business has been flourishing and I can see a big profit because I don’t spend a lot of money on oil, which is very expensive.”

“Five litres of used oil is a mere R29 and it lasts me about three weeks. In my business, the biggest cost is oil so this is another way of saving.”

Gumede said she phoned the owner of the store and asked him to keep used oil aside for her because it sold out quickly.

“Last December I ordered five bottles of this oil for my son’s wedding. No one complained of stomach aches. Nor have my customers been ill from my food.”

When told that used oil was toxic, Gumede did not believe it.

“My parents used to buy it and cook with it and nothing ever happened to us,” she said.

Another customer, Busisiwe Zondo, a housewife and mother of four from Soweto, agreed.

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“I have been using it for years. I know of many families in my area that are using this oil.”

Kock said a recent study conducted in South Africa and published in a US medical journal showed that the use of used oil added the progression of illness in those living with HIV/AIDS.

Although strict measures have been in place for larger fast-food chains, many corner cafes are selling their used oil to stuff and customers.

Biotechnologist Dr Gareth Cambray said that the sale of used oil was “still a huge problem”.

“All the organised franchises now ensure that used oil gets destroyed, but corner cafes don’t realise they are doing it is dangerous. If they can sell it and make a few rands, they will,” he said.

Kock said used restaurant oil should be collected by distributors and used to make soap, biodiesel or animal food.

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