

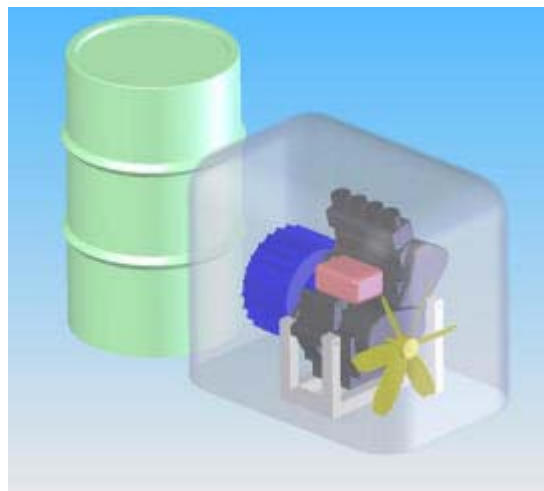
Out of the frying pan and into the power grid

Posted by [Martin LaMonica](#)

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If fry grease can run a Mercedes, why can't it power the restaurant it came from?

That's the idea behind [Owl Power Company's](#) Vegawatt power system, a machine that converts a restaurant's waste oil into electricity and hot water.



A concept drawing of the Vegawatt system that converts restaurant waste grease into 5 kilowatts of electricity. (Credit: Owl Power Company)

Co-generation, where a fuel is burned to make electricity, is regularly done at landfill incinerators or industrial [biomass generators](#). There are also home co-generators, such as the [Freewatt](#) from Climate Energy.

Owl Power's twist on co-generation is that it lets restaurants use what's normally a waste product as a fuel for themselves.

James Peret, the president and CEO of Owl Power Systems, is a mechanical engineer who started to work with a grease car, which uses vegetable oil to power a diesel engine. He realized that a lawnmower-size diesel engine could be used as a co-generator as well.

The company now has a prototype of the Vegawatt power system which it will begin beta testing with restaurants in the fall and release next year.

For restaurant owners, the generator shouldn't be a big change. They just dump their used fry grease into the Vegawatt system rather than their existing dumpsters.

Owl Power System intends to lease the machine, which is about 6 feet high and 2 feet deep, to restaurants for \$400 a month. It's appropriate for restaurants that have two or three fryers--that covers a lot of McDonalds and donut shops, said Peret.

The electricity and hot water the machine generates won't cover all a restaurant's energy usage, but it could be used during peak times when electricity is most expensive.

Between 50 and 80 gallons of oil will cover about one-third of the electricity usage in a restaurant, Peret estimates. They also avoid paying hauling charges.

A leasing model, where Owl Power does the maintenance, means that companies don't need to purchase the machine.

"The minute restaurants hear about this, they say, 'When can I get it?'" said Chad Joshi, chief operating officer of the company.

Even though it is a waste product, fry grease has become more valuable to restaurant owners, particularly as rising soy prices have made biodiesel from soy [uneconomical for producers](#). Enthusiasts collect it for making "grease cars" and there have even been reports of [grease bandits](#).



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