

Biker Information Guide

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Skid Lid Follies

I live in North Carolina, a helmet-law state. The law was just amended, but before I make any comments on that, I want to clarify a few points.

I wear a helmet almost every time I ride. No law makes me wear one, even if there is a law in force. I wear one for the same reason I ride in armor-equipped leather, continue to take rider-education courses, maintain my vehicle, and ride only in a state of physical and mental preparedness—it's part of my risk-management strategy. I do on occasion choose to ride sans helmet in states that allow me to do so legally, but I also believe strongly in obeying the law, even if I disagree with it; I also advocate and vote for the repeal of ill-conceived laws. In my humble opinion, a single piece of safety equipment and a law requiring it don't equal real safety. The change in the North Carolina helmet law will go into effect on January 1, 2008, if signed by the governor. Prior to the July 23, 2007 ratification of NC House Bill 563, the law required that "the operator and all passengers thereon wear safety helmets of a type approved by the Commissioner of Motor Vehicles." The new language of the law reads: "the operator and all passengers thereon wear on their heads, with a retention strap properly secured, safety helmets of a type that complies with Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard (FMVSS) 218." This brings the state law into compliance with federal law and has one benefit for motorcyclists—when traveling across states; they have only one standard to comply with in order to remain legal. However, the helmet that keeps them legal does not necessarily keep them safe, which is ironic, since safety was the whole purpose of FMVSS 218, the original federal law.

It is this antiquated federal law that is at the heart of the issue, and it affects riders in all states with similar helmet laws. FMVSS 218—which sets the standards for performance and testing of "DOT approved" helmets—was based on 1971 American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standard Z90.1, a standard was known to need updating in 1971, and that ANI actually revised in 1973. Prior to going into effect in 1974, the federal law was supposed to be revised. It never was.

Therefore, on January 1, 2008, in North Carolina and most other helmet-law states, I will be required by law to wear a helmet based on a flawed, thirty-seven-year-old safety standard. Better yet, the standard is self-certified by the manufacturers on the honor system. While the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) does limited testing (around forty helmets per year), it is mostly the manufacturer who is expected to test and certify their own products. Consider in contrast that automobile safety standards are updated frequently and compliance is independently certified on a routine basis.

So here are a few questions about helmet laws. Are they affording

equal protection under the law compared to automobile safety laws and standards? Which is better: an antiquated Federal standard, a state-approved list with no required standard and testing, or a free-market based system? Should you trust your life to a helmet made and certified by the same corporation? Would you if that corporation were named Enron or Tyco? Why legislate helmets as safety equipment with similar fines and license points as seatbelts or airbags without similar research and testing? There are many more questions you would be wise to ask yourself before you trust your life only to a Skid Lid. You should also ask all these questions of your elected officials.

Please understand that what I am concerned about is the use of helmet laws, and helmets, as a placebo in place of a real focus on motorcycle safety. Safer motorcycling requires complex actions and solutions: education of both motorcycle riders and other drivers as to the ways accidents happen and how to avoid them, laws that hold careless drivers criminally responsible for the injury and deaths that their actions cause, and modern research and standards in safety equipment.

Real safety for motorcycle riders cannot be achieved simply by legislating a helmet on our heads. This does not mean helmets are bad or won't help reduce injuries. As a parting thought, consider that seatbelts work better today than when they were first offered as a safety device, and the same applies to airbags, some of which were originally so powerful that they killed smaller adults and children. Why are legally mandated helmets held to standards that were outdated in 1971? The same logic would have us listening to eight-track tapes instead of iPods. Isn't your head worthy of better science?

Squash Latkes

3 large eggs

1 fresh long slim red cayenne pepper, stemmed and minced

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon ground black pepper

2 cups, peeled, seeded and shredded winter squash

1 medium onion, minced

¼ cup stone-ground cornmeal

Oil, for frying

In a small mixing bowl, beat together the eggs, cayenne pepper, salt and black pepper.

In a large mixing bowl, combine the squash and onion. Add the cornmeal and toss well. Then add the egg mixture and toss to completely combine.

Heat several tablespoons of oil in a medium frying pan. Place the latke mix by heaping tablespoons into the oil and flatten gently with the back of the spoon, forming thick patties. Fry for 2 to 3 minutes, or until the edges start to brown. Turn and fry the other side for another 2 to 3 minutes. The latkes should be golden brown on the outside and moist and tender on the inside. Drain on paper towels and serve piping hot.

Makes 4 servings

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