

Honey That's Not So Sweet

More and more of the food offered for sale in the US is produced elsewhere and shipped into the country. Typical is a package of whole yellow and green beans that we saw in a local grocery store in late December. On the back of the package were the words "PRODUCT OF CAN USA CHN."

Until recently we gave little thought to the origin of our food because most of it was produced in the US and subject to national regulations on the use of pesticides and the timing between the last pesticide use and harvest.

Perhaps naively, we assumed that food products coming into the US were subject to inspections to assure that the products did not contain pesticide residue levels above those required of US producers or evidence of pesticides that are banned for use in the US. Deep in our hearts we wanted to believe that even though we suspected that the opposite was true.

Not long ago there was a rash of dead pets poisoned by melamine that was introduced into the pet food as a part of one of the ingredients – wheat gluten. The wheat gluten was imported into the US from China where it was deliberately tainted with melamine to give the false appearance of having a higher protein level.

We have come to learn that a very small percentage of foodstuffs imported into the US is inspected at portside. It appears that the unstated assumption of the US food system is that product purity is the responsibility of the importer and the end user. That assumption did little to protect affected animals.

Earlier we had read about antifreeze, a poison, that was substituted for the more expensive glycerin that is used as a sweetener in a wide variety of products from cough medicine to toothpaste. And more recently we read about melamine that was used to boost the protein tests of milk that was feed to babies in China and used in milk chocolates that were sold around the world.

We began to think that we had heard it all and then we read an article in the "Seattle Post-Intelligencer." Under the byline of Andrew Schneider, it was titled "Honey Laundering: A sticky trail of intrigue and crime; Country of origin no guarantee on cheap imports" http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/local/394053_honey30.asp.

The story the article tells is both intriguing and disturbing. While country of origin labeling has been required for honey since July 2, 1984, a significant portion of the honey for sale in the US may be improperly labeled.

As Schneider tells the story, the US consumes about 450 million pounds of honey but produces only about 190 million pounds. The balance has to be imported.

Schneider writes, "U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement began closely watching honey shipments eight years ago. That's when the Commerce Department's International Trade Commission bowed to pleas from American honey producers and leveled anti-dumping

fees on Argentine and Chinese honey being sold for far less than what domestic producers could charge.

"Today, Argentine honey entering this country is taxed an additional 2.2 cents a pound. The tariff on Chinese honey is much stiffer at \$1.20 a pound, and some say it's expected to increase."

But the undercutting of price is only part of the story.

Schneider says that "for years, China has used an animal antibiotic – chloramphenicol – to treat diseases ravaging their beehives. The FDA has banned that drug in any food product.

"Since 2002, FDA has issued three 'import alerts' to inspectors at ports and border crossings to detain shipments of tainted Chinese honey.

"The order in 2002 came after Canadian and European food-safety agents seized more than 80 shipments containing chloramphenicol, which can cause serious illness or death among a very small percentage of people exposed to it.

"In March 2007, U.S. officials revised the alert when Florida food detectives found two other antibiotics – iprofloxacin and Enrofloxacin – in honey and blends of honey syrup that originated from China."

Undeterred, "big shipments of contaminated honey from China are frequently laundered in other countries – an illegal practice called 'transshipping' – in order to avoid U.S. import fees, protective tariffs or taxes imposed on foreign products that intentionally undercut domestic prices."

Honey produced in China is shipped to another country like Vietnam, India, Russia, Malaysia, and Taiwan where it is marked as a product of that country and then shipped into the US at low or no tariff. Other countries the article identified as suspected of involvement in the transshipment of Chinese honey are Australia, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Mongolia, Singapore, South Korea, and Thailand.

Despite assertions by Customs officials, Schneider reports that very few shipments of honey are inspected.

As an unnamed Customs Inspector tells Schneider, "'Someday, some really harmful honey will be shipped into this country, and a lot of people will get sick or worse – and then the government will do something about it,' he said. 'We shouldn't have to wait for people to get sick.'"

It should be pointed out that "safe" honey is indeed available.

Numerous US honey producers sell honey directly to the public or via retail stores. Also, there apparently is no reason to be especially concerned if honey originates in whole or part from countries that do not participate in the transshipping of Chinese honey, for example Canada, Mexico, and Argentina. △



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