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What's This?

China's budding food industry faces scrutiny

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By Zhao Yingquan, AP

A farmer picks through watermelon in south China's Hainan Province. China is producing more food for export, and that has raised concerns about product safety in the wake of the pet food contamination scandal in the USA.

WHEAT GLUTEN SUPPLIERS

The U.S. market for wheat gluten in 2006 was about 540 million pounds. Of that, 154 million pounds, or about 28.5%, was grown in the USA. The top exporters of wheat gluten to the USA in 2006:

France - 16.2%
Netherlands - 16.0%
Australia - 13.5%
China - 9.6%
Poland - 7.4%
Germany - 5.4%
Canada - 2.5%

Sources: U.S. Department of Agriculture, USA TODAY research

By Karl Gelles, USA TODAY

By Elizabeth Weise, USA TODAY

The importation of ingredients from China contaminated with an industrial chemical has rocked American food regulators, along with possibly thousands of U.S. families who lost a cat or dog to tainted pet food.

Serious questions about China's reliability as a food source have been raised as two major U.S. government agencies — the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration — investigate the tampering that led to the feed given to thousands of pigs, millions of chickens and an untold number of farmed fish being contaminated with melamine, which is used to make plastics.

But experts say that although U.S. food brokers were duped by faked wheat gluten and rice protein concentrate — ingredients in many pet foods that were laced with melamine to boost their apparent nitrogen content — the threat to American consumers is diminished because China supplies a small percentage of this country's food.

CHINA'S FOOD: Filth, residue are top reasons for rejection

The overall dollar figures for food imports into the USA from China are high — \$29 million worth of fresh or frozen fruit and \$131 million worth of fresh or frozen vegetables in 2006, according to the USDA. But "the share of the U.S. food supply that comes from China is tiny, probably less than 1%," said Fred Gale, a senior economist with the China team at the USDA's Economic Research Service.

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"It's really kind of a small basket of goods that we do import in large quantities, primarily because China's really doing well in the markets in nearby countries," said Mechel Paggi, director of the Center for Agricultural Business at California State University, Fresno.

China grows half the world's vegetables and 15% of the world's fruit. Even though 90% of its production is consumed by the Chinese people, there's still a lot left over to sell abroad. The country has made a major push to become a global exporter of fruits and vegetables since the 1990s, according to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

China's competitiveness is bolstered by its low costs, a processing industry that's growing and government policies encouraging fruit and vegetable production. The total export value of Chinese fruits and vegetables more than doubled between 1992-1994 and 2002-2004, from \$2.3 billion to \$5.1 billion, according to USDA data.

Most of that is going to nearby Asian neighbors, not to the USA.

But that doesn't mean the average American isn't eating food from China, and some surprising ones at that. If you season with garlic, sip apple juice, spread honey or savor fish dishes, there's a good chance you're buying food from China.

Garlic: More than 50%

China produces 75% of the world's garlic, according to the FAO. Last year was the first year in which U.S. consumers bought more garlic produced in China than garlic grown in California, said Bill Christopher, owner of Christopher Ranch, a major grower of garlic in Gilroy, Calif. California grows "99.9% of U.S. garlic," he said.

"There were roughly 150 million pounds of fresh and peeled garlic from California sold in the U.S. in 2006 and 170 million pounds from China," he said.

Chinese garlic is easily recognized, he said. "In California we cut the roots off but we leave a little bit of a brush. In Chinese they cut the root plate off flat, with no brush."

Apple juice: 45%

About 40% to 45% of the apple juice consumed in the USA comes from China, said Shannon Schaffer of the U.S. Apple Association, an industry group. About 74% of all apple juice is imported, and 55% of that comes from China, he says.

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China is the No. 1 apple producer in the world and the leading apple juice exporter. "They grow about 47% of all the apples on the planet. We (U.S. farms) grow about 11%," he said.

Because of USDA concerns about the introduction of new apple pests and diseases, China isn't allowed to export apples to the USA, but it is allowed to export apple juice concentrate because processing eliminates some of the health concerns.

Honey: 19%

China is also the world's largest producer of honey and the largest single importer of the golden sweet to the USA, said Bruce Boynton of the National Honey Board. Almost 19% of the honey consumed in the USA comes from China.

Americans ate 400 million pounds of honey in 2006, 70% of which was imported. Much of China's population is still engaged in rural agriculture, of which bees are an integral part. The second-largest exporter to the USA was Argentina, which supplies about 16% of honey consumed here, Boynton said.

Seafood: 16%

Almost 80% of the seafood eaten in the USA is imported, 5 billion pounds overall. Sixteen percent of seafood eaten by U.S. consumers came from China in 2005, almost 1 billion pounds, said Stacey Viera of the National Fisheries Institute, an industry group. That portion of the U.S. seafood market was worth nearly \$1.5 billion in 2005, she said.

Chinese seafood quality and cleanliness isn't always up to the standards of the USA, said George Haley, director of the Center for International Industry Competitiveness at the University of New Haven. High levels of dangerous bacteria and traces of unapproved antibiotics, chemicals and dyes have caused seafood shipments from China to be stopped at the U.S. border.

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Updated 3d 13h ago

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inthebiz wrote: 3d 16h ago

South Carolina just announced that they will mark foods that are locally grown. That should be the mission of every state. Consumers should be able to make the choice for themselves.

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freedomfighter1 wrote: 3d 19h ago

:)

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freedomfighter1 wrote: 3d 19h ago

And our dogs.

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freedomfighter1 wrote: 3d 19h ago

See? The Chinese government wants U.S. dead so bad, they poison us.

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legalsteve wrote: 3d 19h ago

I appreciate this article since I now can deal with China's imports by not purchasing apple juice concentrate, chinese garlic etc. Until the Chinese government implements a regulatory scheme no one should. It should be required for all foreign imported food goods to show the place of origin on labels or on stickers on produce. If the consumer has a choice they will make the obvious one. I for one will not purchase any product if it originates from China.

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hartfordcity wrote: 3d 19h ago

It makes me sick to think of what we eat that we have no idea about the source of the crud that is in it or on it.
Buy local food is a good motto.

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lewiscenter wrote: 3d 19h ago

Very very informative !!! Thank you ! I am of Chinese descent.

Anytime we import from a third world country thousands of miles away, we are taking undue risks. Ms. Weise, I have products in my kitchen right now that lists sugar as an ingredient in Chinese, but in the English version the label on the products omit the word -- sugar. Therefore, if you are diabetic and cannot read Chinese, you are out of luck. Let me show you the items.

As for the complaint in CT on restaurants, I can show you some really wonderful Chineses health food conscious ones in Ohio.

Caution and awareness is key, but the food industry in China is suspect as their standards of inspection are below ours here in the USA.

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d.h wrote: 3d 20h ago

Actually, I'm part Irish, part Italian, and little of couple others. In other words, I'm white.

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softwareengineer wrote: 3d 20h ago

IF CHINA'S FOOD IS COMPLETELY SAFE, LET'S FEED THE AMERICAN ELITE GLOBALISTS 100% OF IT

These MSM buffoons preach all American protectionism hurts their bottom line and outsourcing Middle Class jobs is wonderful for the economy; I say let them eat all the food from China. The rest of us will eat 100% American, thank you.

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istessie wrote: 3d 20h ago

"The threat to American consumers is diminished because China supplies a small percentage of this country's food." Well, tens of thousands of pets were sickened and thousands died. What if a toxin slipped through into the human food supply? Are we willing to risk tens of thousands of humans going on dialysis and thousands more dead? I go with this: If you want to join in world commerce, your food and your ethics had better be completely trustworthy.

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