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Health Information

Something fishy? Counterfeit foods enter the U.S. market

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By Elizabeth Weise, USA TODAY



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In 2004, scientists at the University of North Carolina found that 77% of fish labeled as red snapper was actually something else.

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Some of your favorite foods may be fakes.

Foods masquerading as something else — a more nutritious something else — have been big news in the past two years. Chinese food companies in particular have been blamed for making deadly alterations to dairy, baby and pet foods by adding melamine. The chemical makes it appear that the food or beverage has the required level of protein.

But what about food producers in this country? What fraudulent foods do U.S. consumers have to fear from American companies?

Experts say dangerous U.S.-produced foods are comparatively few, but producers have been known to practice "economic adulteration" — adding a little to their bottom line by padding, thinning or substituting something cheap for something expensive.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration regulate the food industry, but with safety issues to deal with, economic adulteration has "really been back-burnered," says Bruce Silverglade of the non-profit Center for Science in the Public Interest. So in a caveat emptor world, what should consumers look out for?

Seafood

Fish is the most frequently faked food Americans buy. In the business, it's called "species adulteration" — selling a cheaper fish such as pen-raised Atlantic salmon as wild Alaska salmon.

When Consumer Reports tested 23 supposedly wild-caught salmon fillets bought nationwide in 2005-2006, only 10 were wild salmon. The rest were farmed. In 2004, University of North Carolina scientists found 77% of fish labeled red snapper was actually something else. Last year, the Chicago Sun-Times tested fish at 17 sushi restaurants and found that fish being sold as red snapper actually was mostly tilapia.

"It's really just fraud, plain and simple," says Gavin Gibbons of the National Fisheries Institute, an industry group.

One thing consumers don't need to worry about is scallops. Tales of skate wings cut into circles and sold as scallops are common. But Spring Randolph, a consumer safety officer at the FDA and an expert on species adulteration, says the FDA has never found an actual case of it.

Salmon is tricky. Randolph does have one tip, though. Farmed salmon gets its coloring from dyes added to food pellets the fish are fed, while wild salmon gets it from the plankton they eat.

"When you cook it, the wild salmon retains its color, and in the aquaculture salmon, the color tends to leak out," she says. Suspicious consumers can call the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Nutrition hotline at 1-888-SAFEFOOD.

Olive oil

This luxury oil, touted for its heart-health properties and taste, has become a gourmet must-have. Americans consumed about 575 million pounds of the silky stuff last year, according to the North American Olive Oil Association. Sixty-three percent was the higher-grade extra virgin, which comes from the first pressing of the olives.

It's also one of the most frequently counterfeited food products, says Martin Stutsman, the

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FDA's consumer safety officer for edible oils.

There are no national figures on olive-oil fakery. But after complaints, Connecticut began testing two years ago. "We were coming across a lot of products labeled as extra-virgin olive oil that contained up to 90% soybean oil," says Jerry Farrell Jr., Connecticut's commissioner of consumer protection.

Most name brands were fine, Farrell says. It was often off-brands sold in discount stores that were the problem.

Connecticut was so concerned that in November, it became the first state in the nation to set standards for olive oil, enabling officials there to levy fines and pull adulterated products off store shelves. California is set to create its own standards this year. Reports from panels of testers have found as much as 60% to 70% of the olive oil sold as extra virgin in the state is a lower-quality olive oil, says Dan Flynn of the Olive Center at the University of California-Davis.

The easiest thing is for fakers to add 10% vegetable oil in extra virgin, says Stutsman. "It will still smell as it should, but you've saved 10% of the cost."

Bob Bauer, president of the North American Olive Oil Association, says it's more of a problem in restaurants than in supermarkets.



Honey

An expensive natural product that's mostly sugar, honey is easily faked. "If you can substitute a less expensive source of sugar for the expensive one, you can save some money and gain market share," says the FDA's Stutsman.

It used to be that cane sugar or high-fructose corn syrup was mostly used to thin out honey. But chemically, that was easy to spot. FDA used an isotope test that would easily identify the adulteration.

So counterfeiters got wily and started using beet sugar. Its profile is similar to honey, so the FDA had to switch to a much more complicated, multistep test comparing the sugar profiles to see if the proportions and trace materials match.

"But once we started catching people, they create a moving target. They'll switch to something more difficult (to detect)," says Stutsman.



Maple syrup

Maple syrup is another high-value item that can be adulterated. In these tough economic times, Vermont, the USA's largest supplier to flapjacks everywhere, may up its testing programs.

The boiled-down sap of the sugar maple tree can be diluted with water or sugar by sellers "trying to get more bang for the buck," says Kristin Haas, food safety director in the state's Agency for Agriculture, Food and Markets.

Vermont's testing program has found fraud only three times in the past 17 years, says Haas, but it's not taken lightly. "A couple of years back, there was a gentleman who actually went to prison because of this issue."

When times get tight, the incentive to cheat can rise like sap in the spring, so the state may have to work harder to keep its premier product pure.



Vanilla

A product of the tropics, vanilla pods can be soaked in milk or stored in sugar to impart a delicate vanilla scent to foods. More commonly, they're soaked in alcohol that is then used as a flavoring.

But vanillin (pronounced VAN-ah-lynn), a chemical copy of the richly organic vanilla flavor, was created in the laboratory in the 19th century. When used in foods, it's supposed to be labeled as an artificial flavor and usually is.

One "too good to be true" product to watch out for is really inexpensive vanilla extract sometimes sold in Mexico and Latin America, says the FDA. It's often made with coumarin, a toxic substance that has been banned in U.S. foods since 1954.

Coumarin is chemically related to warfarin, a blood thinner, and can be dangerous. It's "no bargain," the FDA says.



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