'Made in Canada' - via China

Trying to avoid contaminated imports? Don't rely on food labels, Rebecca Dube writes. A host of unsourced ingredients may lie in what's being sold under homemade banners

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REBECCA DUBE
FROM FRIDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
JULY 6, 2007 AT 8:57 AM EST

Florence Wood threw out all of her dog's made-in-China biscuits during this spring's melamine scare.

Last week, after hearing warnings about unsafe fish and tainted toothpaste imported from China, she decided to purge her own pantry.

Goodbye, tinned salmon. So long, mandarin oranges. Farewell, frozen fish.

"Anything at all that comes from China that's edible we are not going to eat now," said Ms. Wood, a retired secretary in Lac-des-Îles, Que. She's even nervous about putting leftovers in made-in-China plastic containers.

She's not alone. More consumers are taking a hard look at "Made in China" labels after a string of recalls and publicity over deplorable safety standards in China.

But it's nearly impossible to get out of the supermarket without food from China in your cart.

The good news is that avoiding products labelled "Made in China" won't crimp your grocery list, unless you really like frozen seafood - including shrimp, pollock, sole, haddock and salmon.

The bad news is that food labels don't tell the whole story. A host of Chinese imports are hiding behind "Made in Canada" labels, from the freeze-dried strawberries in your cereal to the wheat gluten in your hamburger buns.

"Made in Canada" simply means that 51 per cent of the production cost was incurred in Canada; the ingredients could come from anywhere, and increasingly they come from China. For example, manufacturers can import apple juice concentrate from China - for about one-fifth the cost of Canadian concentrate - add water to it in Canada, and mark it "Made in Canada."

"We eat food from China every day, we just don't know about it," says Dr. Keith Warriner, an assistant professor of food science at the University of Guelph.

Canadians ate $430-million worth of food from China last year, and as China's economic power grows so does its reach into our supermarkets, our kitchens - even our churches. Canada imported $9.5-million worth of communion wafers from China last year, along with $113-million worth of frozen fish fillets and $28-million worth of apple juice.


But North American consumers have recently become aware that inexpensive Chinese imports sometimes bear a hidden cost.

This spring, thousands of dogs and cats fell ill or died after eating pet food containing wheat gluten from China that was contaminated with melamine.

Since then, consumers have been warned about seafood, including shrimp and catfish, that doesn't meet safety standards; contaminated toothpaste and juices, and "Veggie Booty" snack food tainted by salmonella - all from China.

Meanwhile, Chinese officials have insisted their exported food is safe.

But this week, Beijing acknowledged that one-fifth of the goods made and sold in China are substandard, and the former head of China's food and drug administration, Zheng Xiaoyu, was recently sentenced to death for accepting bribes.

Canadian officials stand by their policy of testing Chinese food imports on a case-by-case basis when concerns are raised about specific products.

Dr. Warriner believes greater scrutiny of imports from China will ultimately come not from governments, but from food companies with valuable brand reputations at stake.

"If we started labelling all the individual ingredients, the label would be a book," he says.

Dr. Warriner says that he avoids some made-in-China products, such as frozen fish, but that there's "no cause for alarm" about the myriad ingredients from China that fill our bellies daily.
Not everyone is so sanguine.

Canada's growing gluttony for Chinese imports is a disaster waiting to happen, says Bruce Cran, president of the Consumers Association of Canada. Other than writing to their MPs or buying only locally grown food, Mr. Cran says, there's not much Canadian consumers can do about it.

"Consumers are handicapped because we don't have the information we need on the labels," says Mr. Cran, whose family has sworn off all apple juice, regardless of its country-of-origin label, because so much of it comes from China.

Ms. Wood feels similarly skeptical. "We just don't think it's safe," she says. She wishes food labels were more specific. For instance, she has a jar of olives that says "Product of Canada" on it.

"Now, we know we don't have olive trees in Canada," Ms. Wood says. "So where does it come from?"

Made in China

The top 10 foods in volume Canada imported from China in 2006 (in millions of kilograms).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Description</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mandarins, clementines and similar citrus hybrids, fresh/dried</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frozen fish fillets</td>
<td>24.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apple juice</td>
<td>21.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pears and quinces, fresh</td>
<td>13.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Raw peanuts</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frozen shrimps and prawns</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasta</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mushrooms</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other citrus fruits</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrimps and prawns, prepared or preserved</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: STATISTICS CANADA

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