The horsemeat scandal

The food critic of the French newspaper Le Monde claimed that the horsemeat scandal was ‘an English ethno-centric attitude that applies also to rabbit, andouillette (a type of sausage made from the small intestine of pigs or cattle), frogs and calves heads. The English consider the horse a “domestic animal”’. He added that horsemeat was low in fat and ideal for steak tartare.

The current horsemeat scandal began in Ireland. In November 2012 the Food Safety Authority (FSA) of Ireland tested a range of cheap frozen beef burgers and ready meals for the presence of DNA from other species which were undeclared. In tests of foods carried by supermarkets, it found horse DNA in over a third of the beef burger samples, and pig in 85% of them. Since then, rogue horsemeat has been identified in supermarkets, school dinners, hospital meals and in the pub and hotel group Whitbread.

The FSA identified three factories as the source of beef products: two in Ireland and two in the UK. Two of the factories, including the British one, were subsidiaries of ABP Food Group, one of the largest beef processors in Europe. At first ABP blamed its continental suppliers from the Netherlands and Spain, but later said that the meat had come from Poland.

An economy beef burger can legally contain as little as 47% beef. DNA from other species can be legally present in burgers and ready meals so long as they are identified correctly to the manufacturer. Manufacturers may add other ingredients including water and fat, and use concentrated proteins to bind the water and fat in. They may appear on labels as ‘seasoning’.

Once the Irish authorities had reported their findings, the UK FSA asked the food industry to test all its beef products for horse. Tests revealed that the ‘beef’ in frozen lasagne and spaghetti bolognese made for Tesco, Aldi and Findus by the French manufacturer, Comigel, was up to 100% horse. Comigel was making cheap beef meals for supermarkets and branded companies in 16 different European countries so the scandal spread rapidly.

The food and retail industries have become highly concentrated and globalised in recent decades. They have developed very long supply chains, particularly for their economy lines, which enable them to buy the ingredients for processed foods from wherever they are cheapest at any point. In practice, the longer and more complex the supply chain, the more difficult it is to control.
The UK's horsemeat scandal was to a large degree the result of a switch from UK to foreign meat suppliers in 2012 caused by an abrupt change in European regulation. From 2012, it became illegal to label desinewed meat (a fine mince rubbed under pressure from carcasses) as meat. Desinewed meat produced in the UK was the main ingredient in most value-range burgers, sausages, pies and kebabs. The change meant that thousands of tonnes of meat had to be sourced from elsewhere and at low cost. Until the change, most meat in low-priced products would have come from the UK, and was therefore much easier to control.

Is horsemeat safe?

Horses are regularly treated with an anti-inflammatory drug called phenylbutazone or bute. Bute is banned from the human food chain. Some of the trade in horsemeat that has been passed off as beef is believed to involve criminal activity, and there are fears regarding food safety and hygiene regulations. Bute can cause a potentially fatal blood disorder in humans called aplastic anaemia. However, aplastic anaemia is rare. Evidence suggests that around one person in 30,000 exposed to bute when used as a human medicine suffered a serious side-effect.

No bute is allowed in horsemeat for human consumption. A person would have to eat more than 500 horse burgers to get a harmful dose.

Consumer attitudes

Public confidence in food has been hit, with between a third and a half of consumers saying they would stop buying processed meat. Nearly 50% of those questioned blamed meat processing companies for the crisis and 20% blamed food manufacturers, only 10% blamed supermarkets. Over a third of people said that they were less likely to purchase processed meat as a result of the scandal with a similar proportion saying it would make no difference. A quarter of people claimed they did not buy processed meat anyway.

Small-scale butchers offering locally sourced high quality meat have seen trade jump by as much as 30% as shoppers turn away from cheaper processed food. Overall sales among their members have risen by 20% with sales of freshly prepared beef burgers and meatballs up by as much as 30%.

See the Tesco statement here.

Activities

1. Comment on the quote from the food critic of Le Monde. To what extent does it suggest links between social systems and food production systems?

2. Describe the main characteristics of the beef food production system.

3. In what ways has the food production system become globalised?

4. Are there specific health risks associated with horsemeat?

5. What were ‘the issues’ regarding horsemeat?
Answers

1. The UK is a rich country and, as such, we would expect people there to have a diet rich in meat and dairy products. Although people there regularly eat beef and pork, they do not eat horse, rabbit, frogs, andouillette and calves heads. This may be because some animals, notably rabbits and horses, are seen as pets rather than food sources. In other countries, such as France, horse, rabbit and frogs are more common in the diet.

2. The beef food production system is pastoral, intensive, sedentary and commercial.

3. The beef food production system has become globalised in that animals and animal-products are sourced from all over the world. Owing to changes in food legislation, the UK needed to find supplies of cheap protein to put into its economy meat. These were sourced largely outside the UK, making the checking of food quality more difficult.

4. There are no specific health risk with eating horsemeat, although there is a slim chance of developing aplastic anaemia. However, a person would have to eat the equivalent of 500 horseburgers to get a harmful dose. Even when bute has been used as a human medicine only one person in 30,000 suffers a serious side effect.

5. The main issues did not include food safety. Human health was not put at risk. The main issue for consumers was that they were being sold a product that did not contain the ingredients it was supposed to contain. Low quality horsemeat was substituted for higher quality beef. Another issue was that there appeared to be an organised system of meat substitution on a large-scale. Potentially, if this was being run by organised crime, there could be health and safety issues.