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Cheat eats

Robert Foyle Hunwick wonders how dangerous Chinese food is – and what's being done to fix it

When the cops raided a dozen grimy Zhejiang workshops in late March, they expected to find 'gutter oil', a toxic cooking product made from recycled restaurant waste that plagues many low-end Chinese eateries. They did – but the rusting barrels inside were full of a disturbing new variety, made from rotting abattoir offcuts.

With food scandals growing ever more disgusting, standards have never seemed in a more parlous state. China's State Food and Drug Administration (SFDA)'s most recent answer was, in April, to ask major chains to show more self-discipline, as certain 'illegal and trust-breaking operations' were 'tarnishing the positive image'.

Expecting corporations to 'self-police' seems naïve, but the SFDA memo does highlight two things: first, in an industry tainted by everything from melamine and ammonia to steroids and 'fake' food, those Chinese who can afford the privilege trust in multi-national brands, such as Yum! (which includes KFC and Pizza Hut), McDonald's and Ajisen, for safety. 'In 2011, food imports in China surged 28 percent,' says Sébastien Breteau, CEO of Asia Inspection, which audits the food industry

in China, including restaurants, kitchens and factories. 'Analysts attribute this to rising living standards and weak consumer confidence in Chinese products.'

Second, food safety is increasingly becoming a flashpoint issue – a China Market Research Group survey of 5,000 people in 15 cities named it as their biggest concern, above education. The government sees the big chains as vital partners in buttressing its nascent system. But the media likes to catch them out.

McDonald's was the subject of a rather limp investigation this March by CCTV, which made the shattering revelation that their Sanlitun branch had sold 'expired' patties. On Weibo, however, the hashtag 'I trust McDonald's more than I trust CCTV' summed up the feelings of many.

At the moment, consumers in China are still more concerned about getting poisoned than getting fat. Rising costs and population mean that bigger, faster and cheaper beats healthier, safer and costlier every time, despite a recent growth in self-certified organic farms. 'Chinese economic development over the last 20 years has grown largely at the expense of the environment,' says Breteau. 'The raw materials

have been directly and negatively affected: Chinese suppliers will use the cheapest available.'

One common profitable shortcut is illegal additives. Clenbuterol – an anabolic agent used to produce leaner meat that can also cause nausea, headaches and heart palpitations – has now become so ubiquitous that the Chinese General Administration of Sport has banned athletes from eating pork in the run-up to the London Olympics, according to the blog of Olympic rower Huang Wenyi. A 2011 German Sports University study found that 22 out of 28 tourists returning from China tested positive for the steroid, an indicator of how far the drug has permeated the food chain.

China's Food Safety Law is extensive – and based on principles rolled out in the EU over a period of 10 years – but 'as with many sectors of the Chinese government, food safety efforts are far from centralised,' according to Breteau. 'Currently, ten separate government agencies share the task of food control.' Sometimes, they compete to pass the buck: our call to the Bureau of Quality and Technical Supervision was directed to the State Administration for Industry and Commerce, which insisted that the matter is the SFDA's remit – and the SFDA, of course, suggested trying the Bureau of Quality and Technical Supervision.

Breteau notes that 'the Chinese government has started making "examples" of selected food producers, using seldom-enforced

laws. But, across this vast country, it's difficult to expect a significant or sustained improvement from one day to the next.'

One method diners in Beijing use to reassure themselves about what they're consuming is by frequenting locations with sanitation certificates – the blue 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' posters, displayed front-of-house in the capital's better eateries.

The system is run by the SFDA, who refused to answer most of our questions – their budget, for example, is a state secret – but admitted that their entire food-safety team amounted to 'only ten people'.

The SFDA say they're just responsible for 'formulating policies'. 'We set up this [rating] system to evaluate restaurants on a voluntary basis,' they explain. The A, B and C marks correspond to 'smiley, plain and unhappy faces', offering what they call 'an easily recognised visual sign to raise both restaurant and customer awareness of food hygiene and safety'. Diners who didn't realise that their favourite restaurant's 'C' is actually more of an 'E' might beg to differ, however.

Five famously foul foods

1 Hogwash oil As mentioned above, this March saw 100 ne'er-do-wells busted for producing oil from maggotty waste meat. Now *that's* a fly-up.

2 Hair-raising sauce In 2005, a Hubei workshop was found by CCTV to be distilling an amino acid from human hair in order to make soy sauce.

3 Cat chuan'r Animal rights activists confirmed a long-running fear in 2006: cheap restaurants and kebab vendors were selling cat-meat as lamb. To fix the flavour, the meat was soaked in sheep urine. So there's *some* mutton in there...

4 Glow-in-the-dark pork No need to turn the lights on: a phosphorescent bacterial additive took porky midnight feasts to a new level of convenience in 2011.

5 Fake eggs The 2009 discovery of man-made chemical eggs suggests that, no matter how small the margin (about 0.15RMB per egg), the unscrupulous will do anything for an extra *fen*. Classes (for 800RMB) even teach how to make bank on fake eggs.