



Made in Canada?

Recent concerns regarding the safety of imported fruits, vegetables and ingredients have many consumers turning to locally grown and processed products, and asking just what's on the plate

By Ralph Pearce

Consumers today want it all. They want food that is healthy, exciting, great tasting, lovely to behold, convenient, safe, inexpensive and abundant. And much to the credit of everyone involved in the food supply chain, from the growers to the processors and retailers, the consumer largely gets what he or she wants. However, with the increasing reality of a larger, more global marketplace, questions have begun surfacing regarding the safety of imported food products and ingredients, some of which may be further processed in Canada. It also has consumers wondering, what's really on the market today?

Canadian consumers benefit from a food safety and regulatory process that by some accounts is the envy of the world. The implied diligence with which primary producers, processors and even retailers conduct themselves is a tangible advantage for Canadian food companies. And for the most part, Canadian shoppers make their selections

seemingly without hesitation, and always with an assumption that if it's on the shelf it must be safe. In the past, this "atmosphere of trust" has been a tremendous asset to Canadian processors, as well as to the agri-food industry in general. And it does pay off – in 2006, Canadian food and beverage processors accounted for nearly 80 per cent of the processed food and beverage products made available to Canadian consumers, at a value of \$78 billion.

But as Canadians continue to search for new taste sensations, and hunger for exotic flavours and culinary experiences, product and ingredient imports have also increased. Until recently there's been little public scrutiny of the amount of imported products that go into goods sold in Canada. In fact, when it comes to consumer awareness of "made" in Canada fruits and vegetable products, and domestic versus imported produce in general, there is a definite lack of understanding. And just as most consum-

ers are unaware of modern farming practices, the disconnect between the public and Canada's fruit and vegetable processors is arguably as great.

One issue causing concern is the question of ingredient sourcing. And, due to regulatory inconsistencies, it's something that can often cause confusion for the public and processors themselves. John Mumford, general manager of the London, Ont.-based Ontario Processing Vegetable Growers, compliments local processors for their diligence, and for the contracts and specifications they have with his member growers. Yet he takes issue with a government entity like the Pest Management Regulatory Agency, which prevents those growers from applying various sprays to control diseases – sprays that are fully registered in the U.S. “A processor imports cucumbers from the U.S. which are sprayed with those agents, and puts them into the same tank as they put Ontario cucumbers in. Then the consumer ends up with the same pickles in the jar,” says Mumford. “How does

that make sense?” It's situations like these that become a problem when consumers begin asking just where their food actually comes from.

Regardless of the amount of locally processed foods that make it into our food supply, imports do represent a challenge for producers.

BY THE NUMBERS

According to figures from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, imports to the province have been increasing since 1992. That year, Ontario imported \$5.25 billion in agricultural and food products. In 2006, that figure almost tripled, to \$13.46 billion, a 156.4-per-cent increase. In that same time span, exports have also risen, from \$3.16 billion to \$8.59 in 2006, a jump of 171.8 per cent.

In terms of fruits and vegetables, imports in Ontario have shown a slight decrease in only one of the

last six years, starting at \$2.20 billion in 2001 and topping out at \$3.56 billion in 2006. These figures are comparable to those in B.C. and Quebec. Although figures from B.C.'s Ministry of Agriculture and Lands indicate a slight increase in exports in 2005 – \$558 million compared to \$552 million the year before for fruits and vegetables combined – a ministry report shows the province “still imports three times as much fruit as it exports.” In Quebec, 2006 Statistics Canada figures cited fruit and vegetable imports of \$826 million, a \$20-million increase compared to the previous year's totals.

Again, much of that increase is due to our increasingly adventure-some palate. And, says Mumford, consumers do prefer to try new taste sensations that are exotic and unique. “Look at Loblaw's, which is a very astute marketer of products to the point where they've developed the President's Choice label into a brand,” he says. “They have products like Memories of Singapore, not Memories

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of Leamington, so I don't think consumers see that as a bad thing."

SAFETY AS A PRIORITY

Despite current consumer worries, research shows that as a priority, safety is not yet number 1. Released in 2006, the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada study *Consumer Perceptions of Food Safety and Quality*, found that consumers are most concerned with the freshness, quality and health and nutritional characteristics of their food. Concerns about food safety actually came in third in the survey. "Food safety is an implied issue," says Jane Graham, executive director with the Ontario Food Processors Association (OFPA) and the Alliance of Ontario Food Processors (AOFPP), based in Guelph, Ont. "Our consumers are extremely confident about the safety of our food supply."

Graham believes the industry should focus on helping consumers understand that many of the foods they enjoy are grown and processed within the province or the country. And, she says, the fact that provincially, OFPA and AOFPP members process 70 per cent of what comes off Ontario farms is a cause to celebrate and promote. She too notes that consumers increasingly want to know the origin of their foods – at the launch of the Foodland "Pick Ontario Freshness" campaign in June, for example, Graham was approached regularly by people wanting to know whether specific products were processed in Ontario.

THE NEW PLAYERS

Regardless of the amount of locally processed foods that make it into our food supply, imports do represent a challenge for producers. And, say some processors, the watch word when dealing with these should be "beware," especially of countries such as China, which offer lower-cost ingredients and produce. Warren Ham, a Stratford, Ont.-based processor and operator of August Harvest, is all too familiar with the impact of Chinese imports. Since the late 1990s, Ham has been fighting the effects of Chinese garlic being dumped into Canada.

Yet amidst calls for increased diligence and concerns over food scares that might slip past the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Ham believes there is a greater need to promote local produce rather than discredit international goods. "Things need to be said, but there were people involved in the garlic fight for years who kept saying, 'We shouldn't be fighting the Chinese, we should be promoting our

quality,'" says Ham. "And ultimately they're right. And when people ask questions, you have to have the answers – that this is what we know about the Chinese food supply, and this is what we know about the local food supply." And, he says, what is known about the Canadian food supply is that it's safe. [EC]

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