

# *Globalization in Every Loaf*

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By **ALEXEI BARRIONUEVO** JUNE 16, 2007

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DOWNERS GROVE, Ill. — In a glassed-off area in the headquarters of Sara Lee, a handful of specialists study computer screens and flat-screen televisions beaming the latest weather reports and commodity prices. They are sourcing ingredients from all over the world to make Sara Lee's assortment of breads, deli meats and microwaveable desserts.

The lowering of trade barriers more than a decade ago has pushed food companies to scour the globe for more exotic — or the cheapest — ingredients to compete in a more global marketplace, not unlike automakers shipping in parts from all over. But with America's relatively permissible food-import rules and weak inspection regime, is the trend to assemble food from so many far-flung locations heightening the risks of contamination?

“Once ingredients are incorporated into processed foods, it is hard to check whether they come from overseas or to verify if there are any unsafe contaminants in the products,” said Michael F. Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington lobby group. “This is increasing the chances that people will get unsafe food.”

The concerns of Mr. Jacobson and some in Congress are being stoked by the recent scandal involving pet food contaminated with an

industrial chemical called melamine and imported from China, which has resulted in thousands of pets being sickened or killed.

Food industry executives say they understand the risks of foreign sourcing and are taking pains to mitigate them.

“Ingredients from overseas are not the issue,” said Robert Earl, senior director of nutrition policy at the Grocery Manufacturers of America, a trade group that represents many of the largest food processors. “The problem comes from incorrect practices from manufacturers that happen to be in another country.”

David L. Brown, Sara Lee’s vice president for procurement, said consumers should not be concerned. “We are going to do our homework,” he said, including vetting foreign factories and in some cases investing money to improve food-safety standards. “It is our responsibility to make sure what we are feeding people is safe. But the more variables you enter into, the more risk you have naturally. It is all about how you address those unknowns.”

The controls in place to ensure that foreign-sourced ingredients are safe “are evolving as the world changes,” Mr. Brown said.



Illustration by The New York Times

Some people say they still have a long way to go. In the weeks since the pet food controversy broke, federal investigators have also discovered toxic toothpaste exported from China and melamine-laced ingredients for fish feed manufactured in Toledo, Ohio. The discoveries have prompted new calls by Congress to overhaul responsibility for America's food-safety system, which is currently shared by the Food and Drug Administration, the Department of Agriculture and a grab bag of other agencies.

Critics say the F.D.A., which bears the bulk of the food-safety load, is woefully underfinanced and understaffed, and they note that fewer than 1 percent of imported food shipments undergo laboratory analysis. The number of food inspectors has decreased in the last five years.

The F.D.A. is exploring ways to use risk analysis to try to pinpoint food shipments that might pose hazards, The Wall Street Journal reported this week. Under the approach, countries and private companies might be required to provide the F.D.A. with more information about imported food.

The rise in imported ingredients has been accompanied by an explosion in imported food generally: food imports more than doubled in the last decade, to \$79.9 billion, according to the United States International Trade Commission. Consumers can only guess from reading most labels that individual food products today contain ingredients from a handful of continents.

Despite having the world's most expansive and efficient agricultural sector, America is hardly the only place where large food processors like Sara Lee, Kraft and General Mills have looked to acquire the dozens of ingredients that make up their microwaveable meals, processed cheeses, baked snack foods and breakfast cereals.

What trade commission figures show is that ingredients are streaming in from more than 100 countries, including China, India, the Philippines and countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In some cases, consumer demand for more ethnic foods in the United States is pushing companies to import harder-to-find foods from exotic locales, but in other cases the phenomenon is simply a function of the way modern processed foods are assembled. The imported ingredients include caseins and caseinates (enzymes found in milk that are used as milk protein substitutes for pizza cheeses) and gums and resins that are used as binders to, for example, give chicken nuggets a certain consistency.

The scope of the global food marketplace is evident on the Web site of the Institute of Food Technologists. There, for the last six years, the Food Technology Buyer's Guide has offered places to buy ingredients from around the world.

Looking for stabilizers or thickeners? The buyer's guide offers more than 100 companies that sell those products, including a dozen manufacturers in China. There are 27 companies that offer "release agents," a food additive, based everywhere from India to Illinois, and the same number of manufacturers peddling "foaming agents," available in Canada, China and the Netherlands, to name a few.



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Peter Wynn Thompson for The New York Times

The food industry bristles at the notion that a greater diversity of foreign ingredient suppliers could increase risks for consumers. Executives at food companies say that they willingly bear the burden of ensuring the safety of their suppliers’ plants and products.

“It’s on us,” said Mr. Brown of Sara Lee. “We can’t sit around and wait for government to iron these things out. We have a responsibility to our consumers. We are the ones that have to step up and make the assurances.”

Representative Rosa L. DeLauro, a Connecticut Democrat, said that the discovery of melamine in pet food illustrated how standards are not being uniformly enforced in foreign plants. With the F.D.A.’s resources overtaxed and with the agency lacking much authority to regulate overseas practices, the responsibility does fall mostly to the food companies, she said. She has been pushing to establish a more powerful food safety agency separate from the F.D.A.

“We need to modernize our food safety system,” Representative DeLauro said in an interview. “The risks are only going to get greater with increased globalization.”

The demand for more imported ingredients has also been propelled by the quest of chain stores and food manufacturers to offer replicable taste. “If you are Pizza Hut, you want consumers in China to be able to taste the same exact pizza in Chicago,” said Catherine Donnelley, a microbiologist at the University of Vermont’s nutrition and food science department. “That kind of uniformity requires that you modify food. You can’t make a natural cheese and expect it to melt and brown consistently.”

Sara Lee’s push some five years ago to establish a national brand of bread helped spur the company to centralize its global ingredient purchasing. Different enzymes and protein sources, for example, are used to make the company’s popular “soft & smooth” breads, which are intended to deliver whole grain nutrition but have the taste and texture of traditional white bread.

In Sara Lee’s purchasing pit, called the “nerve center,” Mr. Brown encourages the team of 20 or so procurement specialists to engage in high-level discussions about energy prices, weather and agricultural commodity trends (like the ethanol boom) in charting purchasing strategies.

Two years ago, separate procurement operations in several cities were centralized here in Downers Grove. Today, up to a third of the hundreds of suppliers Sara Lee uses are based overseas or have foreign operations. Mr. Brown’s group focuses on about 30 countries. Cocoa comes from Africa, wheat gluten from Europe and, increasingly, China. Many of the food chemicals come from Asia, as does most of the honey.

“We could make a case for having something on every continent other than Antarctica,” he said.

Andrew Martin contributed reporting.

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