



DON'T EAT THAT! - TEXT 6A

Here is the first half of an article about food scares.

Don't eat that! Five times that foods hit the news, for all the wrong reasons

1. The Austrian wine scandal of the 1980s

In 1985, Austrian wine exports slumped to just 10% of their previous levels, and would not recover until the turn of the millennium. This was the result not of a poor harvest - though the early 1980s had been tough years for makers of Austria's signature sweet *Auslese* wines - but of a routine quality test carried out at a laboratory in Stuttgart, Germany. The wine was found to contain the industrial chemical diethylene glycol (DEG), more commonly used as a solvent or antifreeze.

Further testing revealed widespread DEG contamination, going back several years. A speedy investigation by German and Austrian authorities found that winemakers and bottlers had colluded to improve the flavor of poorer-quality wines by adding small quantities of the solvent. While DEG is known to have a sweet taste, it is highly toxic: a larger dose is likely to lead to kidney failure and liver damage, and can be fatal, though there were no known deaths from the tainted Austrian wine.

The ringleaders of the DEG conspiracy were prosecuted and jailed, but this came too late to save the Austrian wine industry from chaos, as retailers worldwide removed Austrian wines from their shelves, importers cancelled orders, and many innocent growers lost their businesses. Others were able to continue, but ripped out their *Auslese* vines to start again with different varieties.

2. British Beef and 'Mad Cow Disease'

A new illness was discovered in British cattle herds in the early 1980s, causing abnormal behavior, gradual loss of physical strength, and, invariably, death. It seems to have been caused by the practice of feeding animal parts to cows to increase milk yields. The disease was given the name Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), although journalists referred to it as 'Mad Cow Disease'. In 1989, the UK government banned certain bovine products from human consumption, while insisting that there was no risk to humans or other animals.

By the early 1990s, a significant number of beef-fed cats and at least one tiger had died from a similar disease. The government belatedly brought in stricter measures to prevent infected cattle from entering the human food chain, and organised the slaughter of over 4 million cattle in an attempt to stop the outbreak, though still insisting that British beef posed no risk to humans.

Tragically, this proved to be false optimism: by the mid-1990s, it was becoming clear that a cluster of cases of a variant of a known illness, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) were linked to consumption of tainted beef. Characteristics of vCJD are personality changes, loss of brain function, poor coordination, and eventual death. The first of 144 known fatalities occurred in 1995. There is no known cure, although some drugs can prolong the life expectancy of patients.

The European Union banned exports of British beef in 1996, amid fears of a worldwide epidemic. No such epidemic has taken place, despite isolated outbreaks of BSE in Japan, Brazil and Texas. However, the effects of BSE on the body's proteins can last for decades, and there are worries of another wave of vCJD among anyone who ate British beef in the 1980s or early 90s.

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