

Food adulteration: fraud or just a symptom of cheap food that the consumer will get used to?

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The saga of horsemeat, the unintended raw material in processed food, continues to roll on unabated. But what outcome or conclusion is likely from the ongoing scrutiny of the cheap and cheerful products that the unknowing public have consumed in such large quantities during the last year or so? Following the recent tests of the potentially contaminated products and the attention drawn to the complexity of the food chain, a further question must be raised: Is the 'value for money proposition' that the British consumer has become so accustomed to under threat?

The likely conclusion of the recent scandal, is that the opportunity to make a quick profit, albeit fraudulently, will be the motive behind the adulteration of the 'value' ready meal or burger. However, the role of the supermarkets; the pressure they place on their suppliers and the intense cost-cutting mechanisms they employ in order to provide ever cheaper foodstuffs to the consumer, has also been criticised. There has been much comment regarding the extent to which, including the length of the supply chain, retailers and food processors will go to in order to secure the low-cost ingredients that help to maintain key price-points in the market. However, some retailers have acknowledged that a tighter testing regime will need to be adopted in the future, whilst others have committed to reintegrating the very operations they had previously outsourced – the savings no longer outweighing the cost. A lack of control and transparency in the food supply chain, together with the danger of losing consumer trust, has become too great a risk to bear. The loss of consumer confidence is not an option for the large supermarket groups that depend so heavily on customer loyalty. In spite of the huge economies of scale that their buying power offers, profit margins and targets are dependent on ensuring a strong relationship with their customers.

Subsequently, the question of where does responsibility lie, remains at the foot of the retailers and food processors door. After all, as many supermarket executives have themselves conceded, if their company name is on the tin or packet then they must be held accountable for the contents of that product. It is envisaged, therefore, that this recent outbreak of adulteration in the food chain will lead to greater governance in the very supply chains that form such an integral link to providing good quality and reasonably priced food in the UK. Such systems of governance will require a more rigorous adherence by the industry, a renewed sense of self-regulation, and a more robust process of supervision by government institutions. The adoption of an improved system of 'checks and balances' in the supply chains that the market is so reliant upon will offer greater transparency and traceability. A consequence of which, it is hoped, is that British consumers will be reassured of the reliability and provenance of the food on their plate. However, whether this results in the demise of the cheap and cheerful processed ready meal or burger is yet to be seen.

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