



NY cracks down on mystery meats

From iguanas to armadillos, state inspectors confiscate illegal exotic fare

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NEW YORK - When a food safety inspector walked into a market in Queens, he noticed the store had an interesting special posted on its front window: 12 beefy armadillos.

In Brooklyn, inspectors found 15 pounds of iguana meat at a West Indian market and 200 pounds of cow lungs for sale at another market.

At a West African grocery in Manhattan, the store was selling smoked rodent meat from a refrigerated display case. An inspector quickly seized a couple pounds of it.

All of it was headed for the dinner table. All of it was also illegal.

Authorities say the discoveries are part of a larger trend in which markets across New York are buying meat and other foods from unregulated sources and selling them to an immigrant population accustomed to more exotic fare.

State regulators have responded by stepping up enforcement, confiscating 65 percent more food through September than they did in all of 2005.

The seizures also cast a spotlight on the eating habits of this ethnically diverse city, where everything from turtles and fish paste to frogs and duck feet make their way onto people's plates.

"At one time or another, we've probably seen about everything," said Joseph Corby, director of the state's Division of Food Safety and Inspection.

In an attempt to stamp out the activity, Corby's agency has ramped up efforts, working with the Food and Drug Administration, to prevent this illicit food from reaching store shelves.

Focusing on the source

Instead of just hitting the retailers, Corby said, his inspectors are also targeting warehouses that receive imported products — Russian, Asian and African — from where the food is distributed.

So far, it appears his campaign has been effective. In the first nine months of the year, inspectors across the state seized 1.6 million pounds of food, destroying about 81 percent of it. Last year, the state seized only 976,076 pounds of food.

Food taken by the Corby's inspectors lacked proper labeling or didn't come from a government-licensed or inspected source. Other food was destroyed because of the way it was processed or prepared, like chicken smoked in the home and placed on sale.

Such food can spread nasty bacteria like salmonella or botulinum.

The rules vary from animal to animal.

Bush meat, or anything killed in the wild, is typically illegal, Corby said. Eating endangered or threatened species like gorilla and chimpanzee — whose meat is occasionally found in New York — is against the law.

But turtles, frogs, iguana and armadillos can be eaten under one condition: The meat must come from a licensed and inspected facility. "We have yet to find too many of these places," Corby said.

In a city filled with clusters of people hailing from all over the world, these rules can get lost in translation.

Favorites from abroad

The problem is particularly acute in the ethnic neighborhoods of New York City, where newly arrived and enterprising immigrants open up food shops, stocking their shelves with savory favorites relished in their native lands.

State sanitary inspection reports dating back to 2001 reveal a widespread appetite for this potentially dangerous food.

On a bustling stretch of Manhattan's Chinatown, Bor Kee Food Market has been caught selling unidentified red meat and mysterious fish paste, which is used in Asian recipes.

Down the street at Dahing Seafood Market, inspectors have found frogs being sold from an unapproved source. And next door, authorities spotted crates of turtles and a large tub of bullfrogs being sold without proper invoices.

Inside Kam Lun Food Products in Queens, inspectors discovered questionable turtles and frogs and a clue: "Label on animal boxes states China Air Cargo," the inspector wrote in his report.

"That's a no-no because there is absolutely no monitoring of the standards in these places," said Dr. Philip Tierno, author of "The Secret Life of Germs: Observations and Lessons from a Microbe Hunter," and director of clinical microbiology at New York University Medical Center. "It's subject to the vagaries of whoever is processing the food. Who's watching?"

Singed chicken was also common in these ethnic enclaves. This is chicken that has been singed with fire to remove any excess feathers or stems from a bird. Singed chicken is prohibited because it appears cooked.

At the West African Grocery — where "smoked rodent" was found — the owner failed to explain why he was selling the mysterious meat, saying he couldn't speak English.

But he could apparently read the sanitary inspection report and the word "rodent." "I don't know what that is," the owner said. "I don't sell that here."

A similar exchange played out at another market in Brooklyn called Chang Xiang Trading.

Lost in translation?

When confronted with reports showing the store has sold illegal pork, chicken and ducks, the manager, shrugged her shoulders. Her English was not good, she said.

Sung Soo Kim, president of Korean American Small Business Service Center of New York, says it's hard to change eating habits that are centuries-old.

Kim runs a state-approved food safety education program and has delivered seminars to the Korean community about food laws.

Corby says education is key — along with fines — in getting owners to pass inspections and stop buying and selling illegal food.

One way to get businesses to comply is ordering them to take a state-approved food inspection course that also teaches about cleanliness and cross-contamination.

"Immigrants coming from the Third World would not be schooled in the issues of cross contamination and would not intuitively know hygiene standards," said Dr. Pascal James Imperato, a former city health commissioner who spent six years in Africa with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "They don't know how simple contamination can result in a widespread epidemic."

'Clean them up or close them down'

But if all else fails, Corby will get a court injunction and shutter stores, something the state did 66 times in 2005 and 72 times through September of this year.

"We either clean them up or close them down," he said. "There is a high standard that is applied. We'd rather have it too high than too low."

Ruiad Nasher, who immigrated from Bangladesh in 1995, manages the Master Mini Market in Brooklyn. The market has been in business about two years.

State inspectors busted the market selling more than 50 pounds of chicken from an unapproved source this year. Nasher bought the chickens from a poultry market in Brooklyn, and said he didn't know he was violating state law.

"In Bangladesh, you didn't have all these rules," he said.

Nasher said he now only buys USDA-approved chicken, even shrugging off discounted offers from the Brooklyn chicken purveyor.

"Just for chicken, I don't want to lose my business," he said.

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