

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Fake Food” Fights

Is milk by any other name still milk? Apparently, it is. Dairy producers claim "fake milk" is spoiling the dairy industry's image and they are calling for a crackdown on almond, soy and rice "milks," they say are masquerading as the real thing and cloud the meaning of milk. Though soy milk and almond milk have become commonplace terms, milk's standard of identity says it is obtained by the "complete milking of one or more healthy cows." Most of us are growing increasingly suspicious of sweeping claims that "fake foods" are actually better than the real thing. "Mammals produce milk, plants don't," said Jim Mulhern, president of the National Milk Producers Federation. The FDA has let imitators play "fast and loose" with dairy terms. Soy, almond and rice milk makers are charging more money and consumers are gravitating toward them. Butter and margarine makers also entered the fray. Some states tried to prohibit the sale of dyed margarine, which was naturally white. Parkay margarine ("Golden Yellow and ready to spread!") provided yellow solution capsules so people can dye the margarine themselves. A group that advocates for plant-based products, the Good Food Institute, countered the dairy producers by asking the FDA to say terms such as "milk" and "sausage" can be used, as long as they're modified to make clear what's in them. It's the latest dispute about what makes a food authentic. The US actually spells out the required characteristics for a range of products such as French dressing, canned peas and raisin bread. These federal standards of identity often trigger the food fights. The little-known Association for Dressing and Sauces showed its might in a 2014 mayonnaise melee. The group repeatedly complained to the FDA that an eggless spread was calling itself Just Mayo, noting that under the federal rules mayonnaise is defined as having eggs. Hellmann's mayonnaise maker, Unilever, one of the association's members, had sued Just Mayo's maker citing the same issue. That lawsuit was dropped after the company faced blowback from the vegan spread's supporters. Just Mayo worked out an agreement with the FDA to keep its name with some strategic tweaks to its label to make clear it does not contain eggs. Food identity more broadly remains a polarizing topic. Groups such as the dairy federation say federal standards of identity ensure people get what they expect from products labeled with terms such as "milk."

In the America that I love, trying to fool or mislead folks is a losing cause. I shy away from egg products that have never seen a chicken or milk and butter products that have never seen a cow. The profit motive drives most of this. Buyer beware.

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