

A Little Extra Protein

By Reg P. Wydeven
September 4, 2010

One of my favorite film franchises is the National Lampoon's 'Vacation' series. Starring Chevy Chase and Beverly D'Angelo as Clark and Ellen Griswold, the 'Vacation' movies focus on the hilarious antics of the Griswolds, along with their children, Audrey and Russ, as they travel to Wally World, Europe, Las Vegas and stay home for Christmas.

One of the funniest scenes in the saga was when the family stopped for a picnic at a road stop. Clark is busy flirting with supermodel Christie Brinkley when Ellen announces, "The dog wet on the picnic basket!" and he proceeds to spit out his sandwich. Unphased, Aunt Edna shrugs and continues to eat hers.

Apparently Aunt Edna is not alone when it comes to eating naturally contaminated food.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration actually regulates the number of "natural contaminants," such as insect parts and rodent hairs (but probably not dog urine), that are legally allowed to be in the food we eat.

Natural contaminants are so prevalent that the FDA has even published a booklet describing "Food Defect Action Levels." The booklet is designed to provide food processors with information to help them with quality control in their food commodity operation. The FDA estimates that most foods contain contaminants at about 10% of the established action level. Other experts believe the levels could be as high as 40%.

The FDA explains that regulating allowable levels of natural contaminants is necessary "... because it is economically impractical to grow, harvest, or process raw products that are totally free of non-hazardous, naturally occurring, unavoidable defects."

Natural contaminants consist of dirt, hair, excreta, non-invasive insects, mold, sand, soil, sticks and stones. So now you know why smooth peanut butter is sometimes crunchy. But seriously, the FDA's action level for peanut butter is probably the best known. The FDA allows 30 insect fragments and one rodent hair per 100 grams. Now I'm not so sad that I can't eat peanut butter anymore because my wife and son are allergic to it.

As much as I love mammal fragments, like chicken legs, pork ribs and beef tenderloins, I'm not too keen on bug parts. The good news is that I probably don't even realize when I'm consuming fly legs. In fact, according to a study performed by Ohio University, researchers estimate that we eat from one to two pounds of insects each year without even knowing it.

The FDA contends that the amount of contaminants in food at the action levels they set "pose no inherent hazard to health." Actually, the FDA feels that allowing more natural contaminants may be healthier if that correspondingly reduced the amount of harmful pesticides used to keep levels lower.

The FDA has even stated:

"The alternative to establishing natural defect levels in some foods would be to insist on increased utilization of chemical substances to control insects, rodents and other natural contaminants. The alternative is not satisfactory because of the very real danger of exposing consumers to potential hazards from residues of these chemicals, as opposed to the aesthetically unpleasant but harmless natural and unavoidable defects."

Other interesting action levels are 60 insect fragments and 1 rodent hair per 100 grams of chocolate and 225 insect fragments and 4.5 rodent hairs per 225 grams of macaroni.

I'm going to start eating more meals by candlelight.

This article originally appeared in the Appleton Post-Crescent newspaper and is reprinted with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. © 2010 McCarty Law LLP. All rights reserved.