

Ketchup if you Can

**By Reg P. Wydeven
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Some things are extremely important in my life: my family, my Faith, Star Wars, the Green Bay Packers and ketchup. I put ketchup, or catsup as my grandma called it, on just about everything - burgers, hot dogs, chicken, fish, gyros, eggs, onion rings, spaghetti, carrots, broccoli and even grapes.

I inherited my ketchup addiction from my father, who also puts it on everything, except hot dogs, surprisingly. He has insulted chefs at some of the finest restaurants in the Midwest by putting ketchup on choice cuts of steak.

Proudly, I have passed the gene on to my children as well. Because of our ketchup affinity, we buy the three-pack of 64-ounce bottles whenever we go to Sam's Club. Our house resembles a diner because there is always a bottle of ketchup on the kitchen table.

This is why I was so upset to hear about the crime syndicate that burst onto the black market in New Jersey. An investigation conducted by ketchup mogul Heinz uncovered a criminal operation where a bunch of crooks tried to sell counterfeit ketchup.

Over the years I've written about counterfeit purses, athletic jerseys, watches, electronics and even money. Counterfeiters infringe on the intellectual copyrights of others and try to capitalize on them. I didn't know there was a market for counterfeit ketchup, however.

The counterfeiters perpetuated their scheme by purchasing bulk quantities of traditional Heinz and emptying the bottles into huge bladders. They then emptied the bladders into individual containers labeled "Simply Heinz," one of the company's premium recipes. The villains would then sell the mislabeled condiment at a huge markup.

While some of Heinz's blends are a little more expensive, they're worth it. I unknowingly married into a Hunts ketchup family, but thankfully, I have been able to convert them to Heinz.

Investigators uncovered the scheme after the bottles of ketchup started exploding in a New Jersey warehouse. Officials speculate that transferring the ketchup from bottles to the bladder exposed it to microbial contamination. The microbes would then feed on the ketchup and convert it to gas. As the gas expanded, pressure in the bottle grew until it exploded.

Ketchup is not known for exploding. One reason is that before leaving the factory, ketchup is super-heated to kill any microbes before being packaged. Once opened, microbes could get at the ketchup, however, refrigerating it stifles their growth. But even if ketchup isn't refrigerated, pressure from microbial gases doesn't get a chance to build up because the bottles are opened frequently.

Heinz officials do not believe any of the counterfeit ketchup hit the marketplace. However, if your local grocery store's condiment aisle blows up, Heinz may have to reconsider.

No arrests have yet been made, as the operation appeared to be abandoned at the time of the explosions. Investigators were hoping to catch the suspects red-handed.