



FOOD

for thought

Why only the best fresh produce makes the grade in Hong Kong

By Jon Marsh



THE WRITER AND PHILOSOPHER Dr Lin Yutang once observed that: “Our lives are not in the lap of the gods, but in the lap of our cooks.” Dr Lin was Professor of English at Beijing National University from 1923-1926 and later moved to New York where he became a prolific writer in Chinese and English. He died in Hong Kong in 1976 but 30 years on his words have never rung so true.

Whether it is poisonous pork, vegetables laced with pesticides or toxic fish and eels, hardly a month goes by in Hong Kong without a food scare of some description hitting the headlines. And of course concerns about poultry have been

ever present since an outbreak of bird flu in Hong Kong killed six people in 1997.

These problems have inevitably raised questions about quality controls and regulations in Mainland China, Hong Kong’s primary source of fresh food. Last summer, the SAR government proposed establishing a Centre for Food Safety to monitor what is eaten in Hong Kong. Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food, Dr York Chow, made the announcement after test results confirmed that samples of live eels from local markets tested positive for the banned cancer-causing agent malachite green; a few months later similar problems arose with fish supplied from



the Mainland. A new government department, the Food Safety, Inspection and Quarantine Department, will run the Centre for Food Safety and will also be responsible for strengthening links with food safety regulatory authorities in the Mainland. “We need to expand our surveillance mechanism, not just to local food, but also to other overseas suppliers, including the Chinese mainland,” Dr Chow said.

In a small laboratory in Sheung Shui near the border with China, Peter Johnston, PARKnSHOP’s General Manager, Quality, Food Safety & Regulatory Affairs, welcomed the latest government pronouncements. It was way back in 1997 that he set up the company’s quality assurance department after PARKnSHOP had introduced superstores that brought together the concept of the wet market and the traditional supermarket.

“We were pioneers. The fresh food supply chain has its shortcomings,” he said. “We quickly found that tapping into the wet markets’ fresh food supply chain caused us problems. This was compounded by being a big brand name like PARKnSHOP. Customers expect much more. Back then, these shortcomings caused food safety incidents although we weren’t doing any-

thing different from anyone else, but because it was a big supermarket the story got a lot of media coverage. There are so many food safety issues locally. For example, in Europe, the problems with pesticides I’d come across were the kind raised by green groups. You’d have to eat 100 cabbages a day for 15 years to have a problem. In Hong Kong, sometimes one mouthful can kill. It’s a completely different ball game.

“So we decided we had to completely change the way we bought high-risk vegetables from Mainland China. The concept of simply going to the wholesale market and buying baskets of different vegetables and selling them in the stores could not provide us with the food safety assurance we were looking

for. We set up a whole new supply chain infrastructure. We now have complete traceability. We know which farm a basket of vegetables comes from, what date the seed was planted, when fertiliser was added. We know the complete life history of the vegetable. I’m a great believer in you can’t manage what you can’t measure.”

It is a similar story with pork. In Hong Kong, all imported pigs are sold live at the government central auction before being sent to the slaughterhouse. They are then delivered to the wet markets whole where they are cut up. “Let’s just say that



From China’s farms to the fresh food section of your PARKnSHOP, Peter Johnston’s team makes sure the produce is of the best quality.

conditions are less than ideal and with this system smuggled pork, which can be full of harmful drugs, is a huge problem,” explained Mr Johnston. “What we do now is buy pigs direct from the auction. Each pig has a number tattooed on its skin so we know where it has come from. After the slaughterhouse, the pigs come direct to our warehouse where we cut them up in our temperature controlled hygienic pork-cutting facility - it’s the only one in Hong Kong - and send them out to our 220 or so stores. We have even installed metal detectors to ensure maximum food safety.”

In 1998, PARKnSHOP launched its Fresh Check campaign with a 10-point plan that included food safety audits of all its suppliers and stores, conducting its own laboratory tests, raising its own hygiene standards by training staff and introducing more comprehensive food labelling. Every year procedures are improved to further refine the system. For example, in 2004 the farm number and “best before” date was printed on the shell of every single brown egg from China so customers could be absolutely certain they were fresh.

“We have now brought world-class safety standards to the fresh

food supply chain,” said Mr Johnston. “We gave our suppliers targets to hit and standards to meet and if they did not perform they lost the business. Suppliers were in shock. It took a lot of pain and a cultural shift in thinking. It was tough but it worked. We have led the way in raising standards in Hong Kong.”

Take sushi, for example, a very high-risk product. PARKnSHOP staff surveyed the microbiological quality of their suppliers and competitors. They found one of their two suppliers was excellent and then worked with the other to bring them up to the same standard. “We now have the best quality sushi in Hong Kong from a food safety point of view,” said Mr Johnston.

The laboratory in Sheung Shui tests more than 100 samples of fresh produce a day. For pesticide tests, on average two samples a month are found to have problems. “We can withdraw that batch from stores and then investigate through our farm check system in Mainland China. We can trace which farm it came from and take appropriate action,” said Tse Ka-yin, Laboratory and Fresh Food Safety Manager. “Some more toxic pesticides are used quite legally in Mainland China on slow-growing fruit like lychees,

*Food with
a higher level
of risk is tested
more often*

THE CHINA CHALLENGE

GRACE YEE has a job that might deter many in the supermarket business. She is PARKnSHOP’s first Quality Technical Manager for China, which makes her responsible for trying to raise the food safety standards in the Mainland to the same levels as Hong Kong. Apart from the basic hygiene issues, there are also logistical challenges too. The 30 stores are spread all over the Mainland (mainly southern China but also Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and Chengdu) and tend to be much larger than their counterparts in Hong Kong.

“Fresh food standards are the biggest challenge,” she said. “We are just starting the journey in China. It is a monumental task to put the same controls in place. It will take time but we have started auditing suppliers. It is difficult to get people to change. We get a lot of support from our colleagues in Hong Kong. But some suppliers in southern China know that PARKnSHOP in Hong Kong has very high standards, so they are psychologically prepared for change. We have laid out quality procedures. Now we have to put them in place. There is a very high turnover of staff in Mainland China and a lot are migrant workers. We have to lead them by the hand.


“In many cases, we are trying to persuade suppliers to buy new equipment and build new factories. We have to change the culture of the business. We are saying: ‘If you want to be a supplier, you have to meet our standards.’ We do audits and we point out the problems. Sometimes people were very angry because they have to spend a lot of money. Now the feedback is becoming more positive because once they make the improvements they are one step ahead of the competition.”

Encouragingly, sometimes Hong Kong can learn from Mainland China. A couple of years ago PARKnSHOP found a bean curd factory in Shenzhen that had much higher standards of cleanliness than any in Hong Kong. The company welcomed suggestions about how to improve its technology and is now the supermarket’s No. 1 bean curd supplier.



that have skin that is not eaten. There may be a temptation for unscrupulous or uneducated farmers to use them on fast growing vegetables. We can't test every vegetable. Our sampling system is based on risk assessment. Food with a higher level of risk is tested more often, as are purchases from new suppliers."

The direct sampling from suppliers is not the last line of defence. As a further back up, a team of buyers purchases baskets of food from PARKnSHOP supermarkets around Hong Kong and sends them to the laboratory for testing. The company also puts secret "Cold Chain Spies" in its refrigerated delivery trucks. The devices secretly record the temperature of the produce for every minute of the journey to the warehouse or store to ensure food is kept fresh during transportation.

Despite the establishment of a comprehensive food quality control system, new food issues in the community erupt from time to time. The next big challenge is, of course, bird flu. Hong Kong is probably better prepared than many other places and Mr Johnston and his team remain on the alert for the first sign of trouble. "We are doing more tests at chicken farms in China and asking suppliers to be more vigilant," he said. "We are also evaluating a bird flu test kit. Let's just hope that it doesn't happen." 

PARKnSHOP FRESH CHECK

- All fresh food suppliers regularly audited
- Fresh Check Hygiene Watchers regularly audit all stores
- Hong Kong's first dedicated Food Safety Laboratory established
- Fresh Check Food Hygiene Academy established for staff, with 5,000+ graduates
- Fresh food transported and stored hygienically at the correct temperature
- Fresh food sold in audited hygienic conditions by trained and qualified staff
- Samples of all fresh food are tested/audited to identify problems before they become health hazards
- Customers given the information needed to make informed choices about the origin, freshness, safety, and nutritional content of the food they buy



Clockwise from top left: The laboratory at Sheung Shui, Hong Kong; seafood stall and meat counter at PARKnSHOP; checking toxin levels in the laboratory; fresh fruit counter in a PARKnSHOP Superstore.