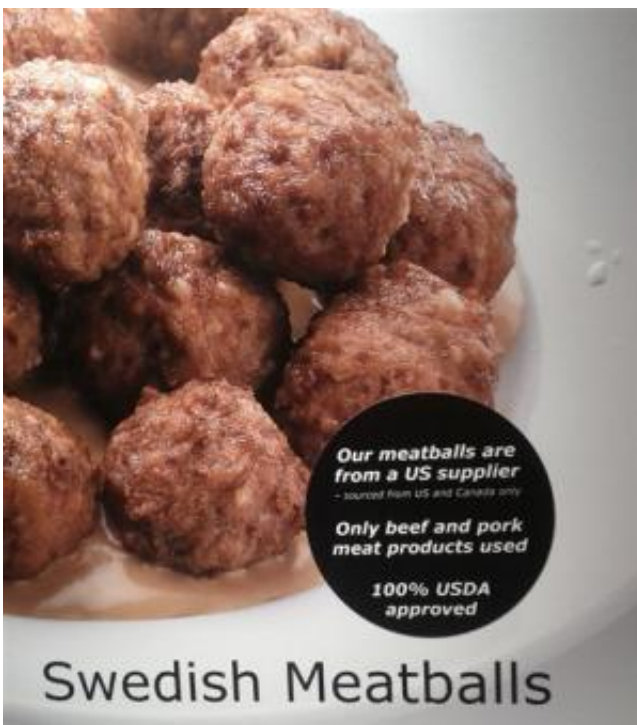


Q&A: Chances of a horse meat scandal in the US?

February 28 2013, by Mary Clare Jalonick



A in-store poster advertisement at the Ikea store in Canton, Mich., shows a newly placed sticker referring to the source of the meatballs served at the cafeteria in the store on Wednesday night, Feb. 27, 2013. The horse meat scandal that is hitting Europe has yet to spread to the United States, allowing American consumers to rest easier when buying ground beef or sitting down for a plate of meatballs at Ikea. (AP Photo/Michael Lee)

(AP)—The horse meat scandal that is hitting Europe has yet to spread to the United States, allowing American consumers to rest easier when

buying ground beef or sitting down for a plate of meatballs at Ikea.

The United States has rigorous meat inspections and horse meat isn't readily available. So, while it's certainly possible that small amounts of hidden horse meat has made its way into the United States, it's unlikely to become a larger problem.

Some questions and answers about the problem:

Q: What's happening in Europe?

A: Horse meat has recently been found mixed into beef dishes sold across Europe, including in frozen [supermarket](#) meals. It also has been found in meals served at restaurants, schools and hospitals. Furniture giant Ikea this week withdrew its famous [meatballs](#) from stores in 21 [European countries](#) and in Hong Kong, Thailand and the Dominican Republic after Czech food inspectors found traces of horse meat in them. Stores in the United States and Canada weren't affected because they use a U.S. supplier.

Q: Is horse meat safe to eat?

A: What is at issue is fraudulent labeling, not a health risk. Horse meat is usually safe to eat, but it's generally not consumed in the United States, mostly for cultural and ethical reasons. However, it's considered a delicacy in some countries.

Q: Are horses even slaughtered in the U.S.?

A: Not right now. Three horse slaughter plants were shuttered five years ago after court action. Those plants produced meat that was mostly sold overseas.

Q: But horses are slaughtered in Mexico and Canada. Companies could import that meat and use it as a cheap substitute for beef, right?

A: Probably not. No horse meat is imported to the United States, so it would be hard for U.S. companies to obtain it in large quantities.

Q: What is the U.S. government doing to make sure Americans don't face the problem?

A: U.S. food safety law requires meat inspectors to be present for a slaughterhouse to operate and those inspectors are present for many steps of the process. They can shut down the plants if they think something illegal is going on. The federal oversight also requires meat to be easily traceable to the plant where the animals were slaughtered.

Q: What about imports?

A: Only certain countries and companies can export meat to the United States, and the Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Inspection Service inspects products at the border and will test them if something appears to be amiss. According to the department, other checks include annual evaluations of the countries that export meat to the U.S. to make sure their food safety standards are those in the United States and on-site audits at least once every three years in every country that exports meat, poultry or egg products to the United States.

Q: What about packaged goods and processed foods from Europe or other regions that may include meat as an ingredient? Could those include horse meat?

A: That is one possible loophole. The Agriculture Department won't say if it has additional checks on packaged or processed imports—European foods sold at specialty stores, for example. It is probably impossible for

the government to test all those things at the border.

Q: Are large retailers conducting tests to make sure that horse meat hasn't made its way into their products?

A: Unclear. Most U.S. retailers don't have a lot of interest in wading into the European horse meat [scandal](#). The Associated Press contacted Wal-Mart, Safeway, Kroger, Costco, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods and other food industry representatives this week to ask what they are doing to ensure their products don't have horse meat. None of the companies responded. Steven Guterman, chief executive officer of InstantLabs, a company that makes DNA tests that could detect horse meat, says his company has received orders for the tests from Europe but not from the United States since the scandal broke.

Q: So how can I be sure there's no horse meat in the product these large food companies are selling?

A: According to George Dunaif of the Grocery Manufacturers Association, which represents the nation's largest food companies, the industry takes a lot of steps to ensure the integrity of products. Suppliers must provide certificates showing that the products they are selling are labeled correctly and companies can demand certain standards. It's also illegal to sell misbranded food, and most brands depend on consumer trust for survival. A scandal like the one in Europe can ruin companies.

Q: What about fast-food restaurants that sell huge volumes of beef?

A: Burger King says it has conducted unannounced audits of all of its suppliers globally, including in the [United States](#), to ensure their meat is 100 percent beef. The company says most of its U.S. restaurants use domestic suppliers but some of the meat is from Australia and New Zealand, and that meat has been DNA tested for horse meat. McDonald's

said in a statement that the company "only works with a select group of approved beef suppliers that adhere to our stringent standards."

Q: Should I be worried?

A: No. There just isn't enough horse meat in the U.S. for it to make sense for meatpackers to illegally mix it in, and U.S. meat inspections in plants and checks at the border would most likely catch any large-scale scams.

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