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Chinese chicken: Which fast food chain may serve you this scary import?

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Would you eat chicken imported from China? Overwhelmingly, **96% of WalletPop readers say** they wouldn't touch the stuff.

Now that a 2004 ban on chicken imported from China **has been lifted**, it could be awfully tempting for some of America's favorite fast-food chains to buy the cheap meat. We asked seven of the biggest fast food chains in the U.S. whether they would buy the chicken when it becomes available. Three said they will only buy American chicken. Three would not say what they'll do. And one, a very big one, left the

door wide open.

McDonald's, the maker of McNuggets and the McChicken sandwich, would not rule out using chicken products imported from the land of recalls and food safety disasters.

"As a matter of practice, we review potential supplies of raw materials globally that could meet our high quality, food safety and value screens to our customers," McDonald's vice president Walt Riker told WalletPop.

But, Riker did not want to discuss the matter further. "It is inappropriate to project anything more based on a hypothetical and speculation," he said.

Do you think McDonald's should have said it won't buy chicken from China?

Yes. McNuggets suddenly seem a lot less appealing. No. They can buy what they want from where they want. We'll see. Maybe Chinese chicken products will be OK.

It really isn't that big of a leap for McDonald's to get into the Chinese chicken game. After all, some of America's biggest chicken concerns -- such as Tyson -- are advocating to open the chicken coop door to China. And Happy Meals already have a fair amount of Chinese components -- the toys, obviously, and the apple juice. (To be fair to McDonald's, most apple juice sold in America is made using a powdery concentrate from otherwise inedible apples grown in China and shipped around the world in 55-gallon drums.)

What did the other fast food chains have to say?

Kentucky Fried Chicken strongly affirmed its commitment to a USA-only chicken policy.

"As you may know, in the U.S. our chicken on the bone is delivered fresh, not frozen," KFC spokesman Rick Maynard said. "It is all sourced locally, in the United States. All of our poultry products served at KFC U.S. restaurants come from the U.S."

The Popeyes chicken chain also said it would stick with American chicken.

"All Popeyes' chicken supply, including prepared chicken products, is procured from domestic distributors and not sourced internationally," the company said in a statement sent to WalletPop. "Popeyes is aware of the possibility that the ban on imported Chinese chicken products could be lifted. However, the relationship with our domestic distributors will not be affected in the event this should occur."

And Wendy's took the same posture. "All domestic restaurants use U.S. chickens," senior vice president. Denny Lynch said. "We have no plans to change."

Burger King, Chick-Fil-A and Arby's did not respond to questions from WalletPop about chicken from China. Only processed chicken products, not whole chickens, would be imported.

The temptation to use Chinese manufacturing facilities and buy products from China has proven almost irresistible to many American companies. You can usually get what you need from China a whole lot cheaper than you could if it was made here, even though it has to be shipped halfway around the world.

But food safety in China has had a terrible track record. Just last year, tens of thousands of chickens had to be killed after being exposed to avian flu (following the outbreak in 2004 that led to the U.S.ban). At about the same time last year, nearly 300,000 babies took ill in China after drinking melamine-tainted powdered milk. Oh yeah, and that same melamine was also found in chicken feed -- which led it to also being found in Chinese chickens. And that's not even mentioning how many people's pets died in 2007 after eating pet food with a tainted ingredient that came from China.

George T. Haley, a professor and author of "**New Asian Emperors: The Business Strategies of the Overseas Chinese**," said the Chinese central government is becoming more responsive to U.S. government requests to raise their safety standards, although food safety is monitored by local and regional authorities.

"The problem is well known and the FDA has substantially increased its testing of Chinese processed foods and chemicals," Haley said. "While the Central government in Beijing has limited capacity to do very much, it is cooperating with U.S....authorities."

Still, he and others are concerned that the U.S. Department of Agriculture -- which, under the new law that lifts the ban, would be charged with inspecting Chinese facilities and making the findings public -- is not up to the challenge.

"Due to significant budget cuts by previous administrations, (food safety inspectors) cannot do the job," Haley

said.

Food safety expert Mark Jarvis, CEO of global food safety and consulting firm Steritech, said Americans should be concerned about food coming from China.

"China has a very difficult challenge in the lack of confidence people have with any consumable products from China," he said. "There have just been a lot of issues from China...that are grounds for real concern. Although the government is saying all the right things...I think they've got a long way to go."

And Jarvis said he's not so sure having inspections in China will really mean all that much, given the problems the government has had policing food safety in the U.S.

Former Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Import Administration David Spooner said politically the U.S. had little choice but to lift the ban. China had filed a World Trade Organization complaint over the ban and he said they rightly accused the U.S. of singling them out -- something forbidden by WTO rules. He said the requirements placed on the Chinese -- allowing U.S. inspectors into their plants and then publishing their findings -- still might be placing too much of a burden on the Chinese to comply with WTO rules. And the Chinese might not agree to the terms, Spooner said.

But if the imports do start, he noted that consumers could end up with the chicken whether they want it or not.

"Poultry doesn't have to be labeled," he said. "I don't think consumers will know the poultry they are buying is from China."

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