

Perspectives:

Cashing In on the Kosher Cachet

By Andrea Horwich Allen
Associate Editor

The demand for kosher-certified food products is on the rise, and so is the workload of the rabbis who analyze the ingredients, the manufacturing equipment, and even the packaging materials used for these products.

Kosher foods comprise "by far the fastest growing segment" of the ethnic foods market, according to Business Trend Analysts, a market research company in Commack, NY. In BTA's report entitled *The Ethnic Foods Market* the company places 1994 sales of kosher foods at \$241 million, a 7.4% increase over sales in the previous year.

"Demand, once driven primarily by Jewish dietary law, is getting a boost from concern among all consumers regarding food safety and quality," the report states.

Getting the Official OK

Numerous kosher-certifying agencies operate in the United States, and countless non-affiliated rabbis do inspections and certifications. The largest and best known of the agencies are the Orthodox Union (known as Circle U), the Organized Kashruth Laboratories (known as



Circle K), and Kof-K Kosher Supervision (named for the Hebrew letter), all based in New York; and Star-K Kosher Certification, based in Baltimore.

The lion's share of the kosher-certification business, more than 80%, belongs to the Orthodox Union — which, like Star-K, is a nonprofit organization. The OU's New York

National Foods is the largest kosher red-meat processor in the United States and the world, and the second-largest kosher poultry processor.

office employs about 30 rabbis, and several hundred more are on staff, either full- or part-time, around the world, according to Rabbi Moshe



A Guide to Kosher Dietary Laws

A. Ingredients that can never be kosher:
Civet, castoreum, carmine, ambergris.

B. Ingredients that are presently not available in kosher form: e.g. musk, natural cognac oil. Given the small number of items in the two preceding categories, the overwhelming majority of basic ingredients may or may not be kosher depending on the origin and processing history. Consequently, they require Rabbinical supervision to ascertain that their origin is indeed kosher, and whether they are meat, dairy, or parve.

C. Ingredients that require Rabbinical supervision:

1. *Products that may be derived from an animal source:* All oils and fats • Natural fatty acids, their esters and especially palmitic, stearic, oleic, and pelargonic acids • Fatty alcohols, aldehydes and ketones • Lactones • Polysorbates, sorbitans and all emulsifiers • Amino acids and hydrolyzed proteins • Glycerol and esters • Enzymes • Enzyme modified products • Whey • Vitamins.

2. *Products that have or may have a grape origin:* Juices • Wine • Enocianina • Natural cognac oil • Fusel oil • Amyl alcohol and esters • Natural valeric acid • Ethyl alcohol • Natural ethyl esters • Natural acetaldehyde • Vinegar.

3. *Ingredients that are dairy or may have a dairy origin and will cause a product to be dairy:* Milk solids • Lactose, casein and derivatives • Cream and derivatives • Starter distillates • Whey and chemicals produced from its fermentation • Fatty acids from butter or cheese: butyric, caproic, propionic and myristic acids. ■

Source: Orthodox Union

Elefant, rabbinic coordinator.

Elefant estimates that the OU is now receiving 50 to 75 applications for certification every month. He attributes the increasing level of activity not only to the growth in demand, but to changes in the food industry itself.

The private-label business is booming, as Elefant points out, and so is the foodservice sector. Manufacturers themselves are becoming "mega-size." The result is that a product carrying the same label might be manufactured at any number of plants throughout the country.

Some of these co-packers might be running acceptable operations, but others might not be.

One way to ensure that a kosher certification won't show up on a product from a non-certified plant is to stipulate that only products from a kosher-certified plant can carry that certification on their label. But that policy can lead to confusion in the marketplace when consumers notice that the same product, under the same brand name, is not always kosher-certified.

Another solution is to require that the company purchase all of its

products for kosher certification from the same plant. As sensible as that might seem, though, the realities of regional distribution can make it awkward, if not impossible.

Instead, the certifying agencies are counting on a combination of new technology and traditional values to help solve some of these modern dilemmas. "We are now developing relationships with foodservice and similar chains," says Elefant.

Presumably, open communication will preclude labeling confusion. So will the use of bar codes to help the rabbis identify the manufacturing plant.

Communication is the Key

Nabisco Inc., Parsippany, NJ, is counting on both a good relationship with the OU and the use of scanners to obtain kosher certification for Oreo cookies. Once shunned by kosher consumers, vegetarians and others loathe to ingest lard, Oreo cookies have been manufactured exclusively with vegetable shortening for several years now. The only remaining obstacle has been that some of the equipment used before the reformulation has not yet been replaced.

When Nabisco began marketing other Oreo bakery products using Oreo pieces as ingredients, Dicki Lulay, director of business development, decided to try marketing the pieces as ingredients to foodservice and other manufacturers. The cookies being used in the "Oreo grind" were being co-packed by plants that were kosher-certified, which would mean that pieces made from those Oreo cookies could be sold to other kosher-certified manufacturers.

The OU has agreed that those cookies, and the grinds made from them, are kosher, but has not agreed to let Nabisco use the OU mark on those products. Until all Oreo products can be certified kosher, the rabbis maintain, using the OU mark on products made with Oreo pieces would confuse the consumer.

The OU has agreed to issue a letter to potential customers confirming that the Oreo pieces are kosher even though they don't carry the OU mark. The result is that food manufacturers and foodservice accounts can use the product without jeopardizing their own kosher certifications, although they still can't use the Oreo name on their own product. The issue will be resolved if the OU does certify Oreo cookies, and both Lulay and Elefant are hopeful that this will be the outcome.

Coping with global sourcing

International ingredient sourcing also has presented some challenges for kosher certifiers. "The world is becoming a very, very small place," Elefant says. "Ingredients come from the entire world," he adds, and keeping up with these supplies is "a very big job."

From their perspective, ingredient suppliers also have found that the global marketplace can be a source of frustration. Kosher certifiers in other countries "handle kosher issues differently," says Tom Courtney, manager of regulatory affairs at Quest International Flavors & Food Ingredients Co., Owings Mills, MD.

"The U.S. kosher set-up is quite mature," Courtney adds. "The rest of the world is not as sophisticated."

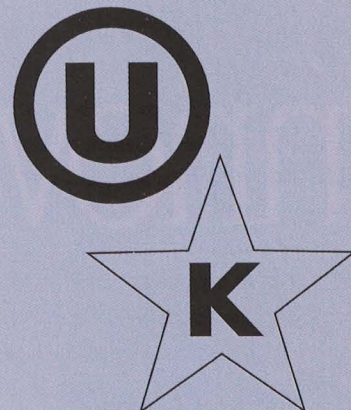
Geographical logistics aside, certifiers also are faced with changing ingredient manufacturing methods. To help suppliers and manufacturers through these sometimes-gray areas, the OU has come up with an ingredient classification system, according to Rabbi Moshe Bernstein, senior rabbinic coordinator.

"Group One" denotes ingredients that are intrinsically kosher, requiring no formal supervision — such as cane sugar. "Group Two" ingredients are kosher, but only if they come from a specific manufacturer. And "Group Three" ingredients also must come from a specifically approved manufacturer, in addition to carrying a specific kosher symbol.

Once an ingredient has been certified and classified, though, the case is not always closed, Bernstein notes. As technology moves forward, some ingredients may have to be revisited, he says.

A case in point is ethyl alcohol, commonly used as a flavor carrier. Until the past 10 or 15 years, ethyl alcohol was considered intrinsically kosher — but not necessarily kosher for Passover — in that it was derived from kosher sources like corn, grain or petroleum.

When French manufacturers began distilling alcohol from wine, it could no longer be assumed to be kosher, according to Avrom Pollak, Ph.D., president of Star-K. The reason is that the wine itself had not been certified kosher, and Kashruth law is very strict when it comes to wine or any grape-derived product. Today, the OU, Star-K and other certifiers require that the source of the alcohol be certified in order for the flavor, and hence the food product



The Letter(s) of the Law

To qualify for kosher certification, a food product, its ingredients and the equipment used in manufacturing all must conform to Jewish dietary, or Kashruth, law. Essentially, kosher law permits the consumption of meat and milk from animals that chew the cud and that have split hooves. This includes cows and sheep, but rules out pigs. Poultry is also considered kosher.

Slaughter must be carried out according to strictly specified methods by a ritually trained "shocket" under a rabbi's supervision. According to Harvey Potkin, president of National Foods, Bronx, NY, the post-slaughter inspection conducted by the shocket is more stringent than the U.S. Department of Agriculture's.

Dairy and meat products may not be mixed, either in a meal or in any one food product. Certain foods are considered neutral, or "parve," and may be used in either dairy or meat products. These include fruits, vegetables, eggs, and fish that have fins and scales — although fish may not be mixed with meat. Shellfish

it's used in, to be certified kosher.

Among the ingredients that have to be considered Group Three are emulsifiers, which might be derived from either animal or vegetable sources. Animal ingredients have to be derived from kosher animals in order to be kosher themselves, which is unlikely in the case of emulsifiers. In addition, even if the source of the emulsifier was a kosher animal, the emulsifier would not be considered parve, or suitable for either meat or dairy products.

Eastman Chemical Co., Kingsport, TN, solved the problem in 1991 by converting its Rochester, NY, plant to vegetable-based, kosher-certified emulsifiers. The company made this move to satisfy the increasing demand for kosher ingredients, and in response to general health concerns regarding saturated fat, says Larry McKenzie, business development manager of food ingredients. In so doing, Eastman also eliminated the inefficiencies involved with producing both veg-

etable- and animal-derived emulsifiers, McKenzie adds.

Eastman's future installations will produce vegetable-based emulsifiers only, as does the company's Malaysian joint venture with Quest and a Malaysian partner. But since many companies produce both kosher and non-kosher grades, the emulsifier itself — not just the plant — must be certified kosher, as far as rabbis are concerned.

The technology factor

In addition to the source of the ingredient, sometimes the manufacturing technology can influence its certification status. For instance, in their minimally processed forms, spices and herbs would be intrinsically kosher. But for an oleoresin to be certified kosher, the entire extraction and distilling process must be certified. This would include not only the equipment, but the solvent used to extract the volatiles and non-volatiles, says Dean Wilson, product development manager for McCormick Ingredients Group, Hunt Valley, MD.

The classification of enzyme-derived ingredients and other bioengineered foods is not going to be so

and scavenger fish are not kosher.

Certain food ingredients are intrinsically non-kosher; others, such as those derived from dairy, meat or grapes, require rabbinical supervision. Kosher requirements for Passover dictate that any product derived from grains requires specific supervision. Additionally, legumes traditionally are not consumed during the eight-day period.

Mary Ann Jackson, founder of My Own Meals Inc., Deerfield, IL, has had to make a number of sourcing and processing adjustments in the development of her kosher shelf-stable meals. She had been manufacturing meals for children, but when she redirected her approach in 1990 to serving the kosher market, she found that not all of her suppliers qualified for kosher certification.

For instance, the company had to set up two chicken processing plants. The company also "buys forward" to ensure that wheat planted after Passover will not be used until after the next Passover, a stringency observed by some kosher consumers. In addition, they had to find an alternative source of citric acid for Passover meals, since the usual supply was corn-derived.

Another complication has arisen as a result of Jackson's work with the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America on obtaining halal certification, which would indicate that My Own Meals also conform to Islamic dietary law. The stum-

My Own Meals offers 14 shelf-stable kosher-certified meals. Five are halal-certified, as well.

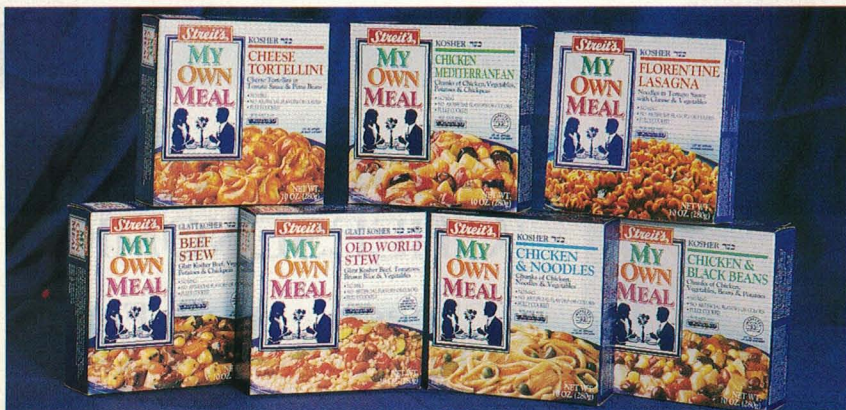


Photo: My Own Meals Inc.

bling block has been differences in halal and kosher slaughter requirements, including who does the slaughter and how the animals are blessed. My Own Meals produces 14 different products, but so far, only the five vegetarian meals — two vegan, three dairy — have both halal and kosher certification.

According to Muhammad Chaudry, Ph.D., president and halal administrator of the Bedford Park, IL, organization, Islamic law also prohibits all alcohol consumption — one of the major differences between halal and Kashruth. For processing purposes, though, a 1:1,000 ratio is permitted — as long as the company shows “an intent to

clear-cut. As the number of applications for certification of such products continues to grow, the rabbis are facing some interesting contradictions.

The use of lipase to create butter flavors represents the potential for confusion in this area. One form of lipase is derived from a calf's gullet; in order for the product to be considered kosher, the animal would have had to be kosher, too.

Although there are synthetic sources of lipase, one manufacturer had been using a meat-derived enzyme that had been kosher-certified by another agency, despite the fact that the calves had not been ritually slaughtered. The OU withheld its certification, and eventually the sup-

plier switched to non-meat sources so that its customers could use lipase in their own products and still keep their OU certification.

In maintaining that the enzyme must be derived from a kosher-certified animal, the OU is consistent with its position on animal-derived rennet. Rennet, an enzyme derived from calves' stomachs, has been used by cheese-makers for thousands of years to coagulate milk. The fairly recent development of non-animal, or microbial, rennet has been welcomed by cheese-makers looking to court kosher or vegetarian consumers.

However, the OU's position — and that of most certifying agencies — is that rennet derived from a

Sauces

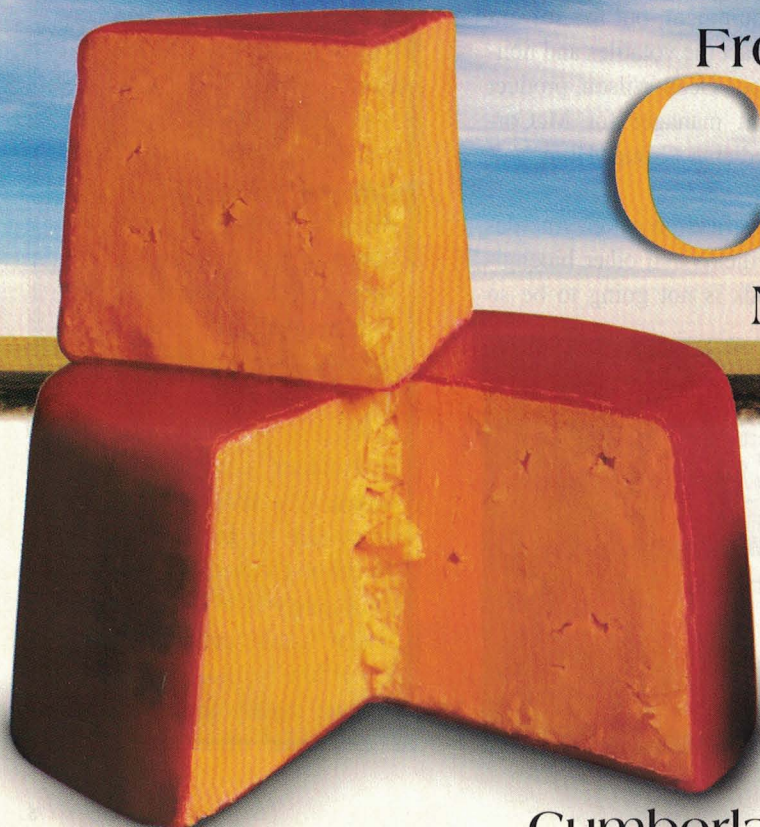
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kosher animal is kosher for cheese-making. Although this is an exception to the prohibition against mixing dairy- and meat-derived ingredients, according to Bernstein, it's not a paradox. The rennet itself has gone through so many chemical changes that it no longer has the same make-up as the animal from which it was derived; in other words, it's inedible as an ingredient and can be used only as a processing agent.

Biotechnology under study

By that definition, relative newcomers on the biotechnology scene should pass muster as well, even those that involve introducing gene markers or gene copies from animal sources. The OU has no position yet,

but is currently studying the issues involved and hopes to take a position by the end of the year. And Bernstein acknowledges that after all the internal discussion is finished, the OU will be in communication with other agencies before announcing a position.

"No matter how entrenched you are in your position, if there's another agency or group of rabbis who have integrity, it behooves you to listen to their position," Bernstein says.

One certifier who is certain to take a position is Rabbi Moshe Heinemann, Star-K's rabbinic coordinator. According to Pollak, Heinemann, an acknowledged Kashruth expert, believes that "gene technology by itself is not necessarily a con-

improve." Jackson did have to switch vanilla suppliers to obtain halal certification, but Chaudry suggests that in some formulations, alternatives such as powdered vanilla might work.

Food designers would do well to investigate halal requirements in addition to Kashruth. According to Chaudry, there are some 6 million practicing Muslims in the United States.

The big money is in the export market, Chaudry says, and most of the U.S. companies seeking halal certification are exporting. Small wonder: Worldwide, there are about 1.2 billion Muslims, all of whom are potential consumers of foods made in America. ■

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