

Europe upset at food names

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WASHINGTON — There's a global food fight coming.

European food producers want the rest of the world to stop selling cheese labeled Parmesan unless it comes from Parma, Italy. They insist that only Pilsener beer brewed in the Czech Republic carry that description. They say bologna must hail from the Italian city of Bologna to be worthy of the name.

For U.S. food makers, who for years have traded on the fame of the world's most celebrated regional fare when naming their products, it's a real problem.

The United States already protects some products with roots in specific European regions — for example, cognac must come from France — but the Europeans now want this protection extended to hundreds of food products ranging from Greek feta cheese to traditionally produced balsamic vinegar from Italy's Modena and Reggio Emilia provinces. Under one proposal, food inspectors from Italy might inspect America's 50,000 Italian restaurants to ensure that they use authentic ingredients and methods.

The World Trade Organization, which sets rules for international commerce, plans formal talks on the issue at its ministerial meeting in Cancun, Mexico, in September. Some observers believe that the Europeans will end up trading their determination to protect regional food specialties for, say, U.S. tolerance of their subsidies to domestic moviemakers. Others say the Europeans are in no mood to compromise with Americans.

Europeans have yet to issue a list of U.S. products to which they object, but the prospect has U.S. companies nervously contemplating the cost of renaming products that Americans have adopted as their own — and rebuilding those products' reputations from scratch.

As Ralph Ichter, president of EuroConsultants Inc., candidly put it, if the Europeans succeed, "U.S. companies would be screwed." EuroConsultants represents French wine and spirits exporters on trade issues.

European legislation provides protection for up to 600 food products that are historically linked to a particular location, known as Geographical Indications. The new effort seeks to end what the European Community contends is the fraud caused when foreign companies hijack indigenous names and their well-earned reputations.

U.S. companies counter that terms such as Black Forest ham and linguica sausage have become widely used and generic since they were brought over by German and Portuguese immigrants, respectively.

"These are things we started producing when we first got here," said Sarah Thorn, director of international trade at the Grocery Manufacturers of America.

Francesco Forte of the commercial office at the Italian Embassy said he believes that U.S. companies using Italian names are "trying to exploit the reputation of the Italian product to sell theirs."

Forte claims that as well as confusing consumers, this food forgery harms Italian exports by reducing the market share of Italian products and threatening their good names. "If people aren't satisfied with them, they'll think they're from Italy," he protested.

The experience of the Danes is the U.S. producers' nightmare. Last year, the European Union prohibited non-Greek cheese producers from using the term feta, a decision that Denmark, the world's leading producer of feta, is challenging.

According to Eleanor Meltzer of the U.S. Commerce Department's Patent and Trademark Office, if American-made products such as Parmesan were to suffer a similar fate, consumers as well as manufacturers would lose. Companies would "lose their market share. You or I wouldn't know what they were selling. They would have to re-label their products and educate us."

Italian-made Parmesan, Thorn said, "would cost three times as much as what you're used to. That wouldn't help consumers."

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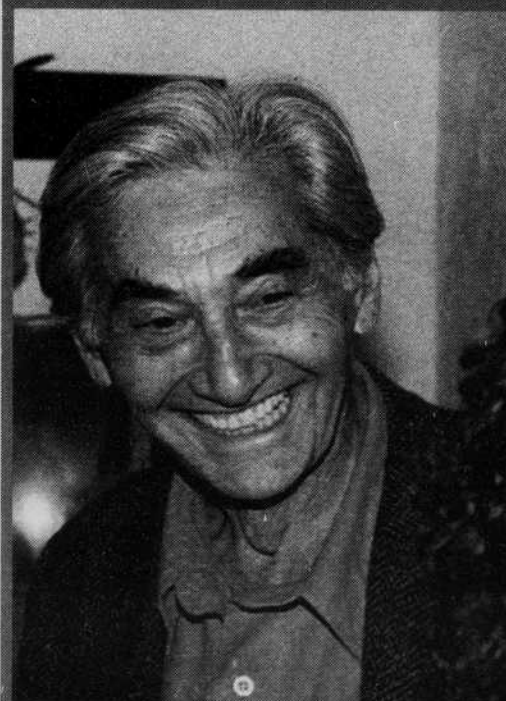
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