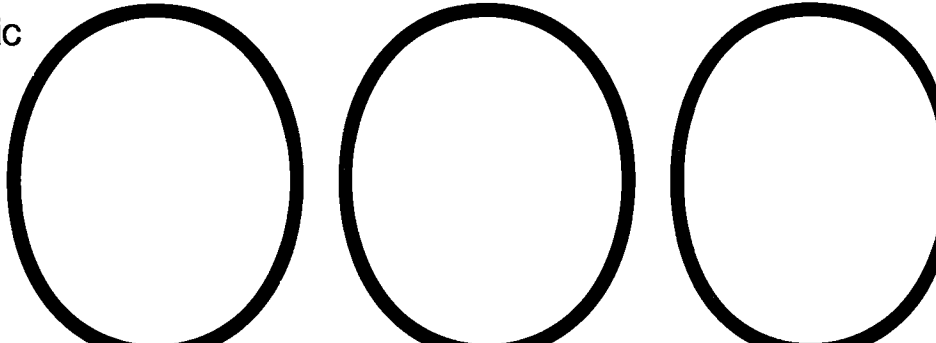


Consumers' food safety concerns threaten to snarl transatlantic relations

By Lionel Barber



Europe is in a funk about food safety. Beef hormones, Coca-Cola, eggs, genetically modified foods, or mad cow disease—in each of these cases public confidence plummeted this summer.

The immediate cause is a succession of food safety scares that have wrong-footed governments and forced traditionally powerful food producers in Europe and the US onto the defensive.

In Belgium, worries about cancer-causing dioxin obliged the government to recall millions of eggs and hundreds of thousands of pounds of meat products. The shelves in supermarkets were so bare that many believe the embarrassment deprived Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene of re-election in the June poll.

At the same time, Coca-Cola was forced to make the biggest product recall in its 113-year history after admitting that it had injected substandard carbon dioxide into some bottled drinks at its Antwerp, Belgium factory. Coca-Cola's tardy response ensured that it became the butt of many cartoon jokes, including its trademark polar bear changing its name to Coca-Colic.

But all these scares have been overshadowed by a powerful campaign in Europe against food produced using genetically modified organisms (GMO) that has forced even the broadly pro-GMO government in the United Kingdom to take heed. A chorus is growing in favor of a ban—or at least a moratorium—on planting GMO crops and on the sale of imported foods containing them.

The US has become irritated by the apparent willingness of EU governments' to bow to public anxieties about



food safety, chiefly by outlawing products without demonstrating that they are unsafe. Trade tensions are increasing, and there is not much hope for an improvement in relations because the two sides fundamentally disagree about how to tackle public confidence.

Europeans believe that the lack of scientific certainty about the effects of GMO foods (and beef hormones in meat products) means that consumers are instinctively reluctant to accept that they are safe. Rightly or wrongly, they

are unwilling to accept a vote of confidence from the US Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) or indeed numerous scientific committees in Europe.

Americans, on the other hand, insist that the present discontent lies in a lack of public confidence in government, rather than an inherent mistrust in science. They blame public misgivings on the EU's opaque and secretive system for regulating food safety that, they argue, encourages decisions based on political opportunism rather than hard

build up the Nouveau Marché, France's fledging answer to the US's NASDAQ. French risk capital, which last year was going into Californian startups, is now coming home. The big funds linked to France Telecom, the Vivendi services group, and the Axa insurance giant are now acting as "business angels" to their compatriots following the blandishments of DSK. Sums upward of \$20-\$30 million are being invested in some French startups. There are moves toward US-style stock options. At the same time, DSK is backing Education Minister Claude Allegre in inundating schools with computers, a process now well underway, and in cajoling the prestigious state-funded research laboratories to bring the fruits of their research to the marketplace.

Large companies, such as the nationwide FNAC record chain, are turning to e-commerce. Japan's Softbank, which has financed so many US startups, including Yahoo, has recently linked with Vivendi. Bernard Arnault, who has turned his energies from haute couture and perfumes to the Internet, will work with them.

One of the most spectacular moves that caught the public imagination was DSK's decision to allow small firms to make valued added tax (VAT) declarations via the Internet starting next year. In one stroke, a vast Kafka-esque chunk of French bureaucracy with its ten of millions of printed forms will disappear.

DSK, in a summer speech, said the IT and communications sectors now represented 5 percent of GDP, more than tourism and the equivalent of the combined automobile and energy sectors. The minister said he wants one French firm in two to be firmly in the Internet world very soon. "What we are seeing with [the] Internet and e-commerce," he noted, "is the emergence of the almost perfect marketplace."

If he ever has doubts, these vanish when he returns home to his wife, Anne Sinclair, a former star interviewer and now a television executive, who is completely "sold" on the Internet. She admits to surfing French and American sites practically every evening. The minister's wife, a role model to many Frenchwomen, is now widely emulated by female internautes who make up 37 percent of the French total.

## SITES OF THE MONTH

### www.camembert-country.com

Only in France, a country with more than 400 native cheeses, would there be a web site devoted entirely to Camembert cheese. The Land of Camembert web site offers information on the village that gave its name to the famous cheese, the production process, and Marie Harel, the folkloric milkmaid who created the creamy dairy concoction. Web surfers can even find a listing of references to Camembert by famous politicians, artists, and writers such as Clemenceau and Dali. This site is available in both French and English.

### www.asterix.tm.fr

Astérix, the official site of France's Gaulish comic book heroes, can be accessed by even the most un-French

Anglo-Saxon since it is available in English. The site features a step-by-step demonstration of how a comic book is put together, contests for kids to win prizes, Astérix and his friends around the world, the recent Astérix movie, and an on-line store. In addition, there is a featured story every week and a link to the Astérix amusement park near Charles de Gaulle Airport.

### www.vegetarisme.org

In a country where only 1 percent of the population professes to be vegetarian, this site is somewhat of an anomaly among the wide range of gastronomic pleasures produced in French kitchens. Végétarisme.org offers veggie recipes and listings of restaurants in all major French cities that cater exclusively or partially to vegetarians. The discerning vegetarian will also find nutritional information, veggie terminology, and links to vegetarian organizations in France. However, this site is only in French, though it does offer a link to a UK site that has a listing of veggie restaurants in France.

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