

## FROM SHANGHAI - The Foreign Taitai (Housewife) and the Grocery Shopping

Bianca Sorminis (January 24, 2013)



Maybe for fear of the '(un)known' or maybe because it feels more natural to buy products whose name you can read, maybe for the nostalgia that grips you when you're so far away from your Country...the average expat tends to buy considerable quantities of imported food: meat from



Australia and Argentina, UHT milk mostly from France and New Zealand, pasta from Italy and Spain, wines from anywhere but China (the most popular local wine is Dynasty – which foreigners read as “Die Nasty”), imported frozen foods (only if when you get the box out of the supermarket freezer it doesn’t come alive...clear sign that somewhere on its way, it hasn’t been kept at the right temperature and has in the meantime defrosted only to be put in the freezer again ready to be sold), and over the years the variety of imports has increased much to the delight of us foreigners...

#### IF IT'S FOOD I NEED THE PROOF

I have lived in Shanghai for over 5 years and during this time we’ve had so many food scandals that they defy the most fervid imagination ... milk tainted with melamine (which looks like proteins in tests), exploding watermelons (after being injected with a chemical to make them grow faster and bigger), glowing pork (apparently contaminated by bacteria but deemed safe to eat), artificial green peas (the hint there was that after 20 minutes of cooking, the peas did not turn soft but the water turned green), fake eggs made from resin, artificial beef made from reconstituted pork, fake pepper (made of mud and flour) ... We’ve had poison in the toothpaste, skin irritating paper napkins (made of recycled paper and therefore a little bit grey, so someone thought it was a good idea to add bleach to make them look whiter...), chlorine-tainted soft drinks ... and many more.

You’re so caught up reading about these regular finds, that you nearly forget the daily excessive pesticide used on crops, antibiotics on chickens and pigs, or the polluted ground water watering them...

To be fair there have also been some imported goods scandals ... like the tainted Italian olive oil (the origin wasn’t clearly stated, the olives could have come from Spain instead of Italy, posing of course a very serious health hazard) or cereal bars from a very famous brand found with mold, a total of 14 yoghurt products from a very well known French dairy company imported to Shanghai were destroyed because they had expired, and even more than five tons of a German mixed vegetable mash were found to have labeling problems and, of course, they were destroyed as well.

I must admit it does give me some comfort to know that the China's quality watchdog is always on high alert and that foreign Countries have to step up checks on products to ensure they meet Chinese standards. What a relief!

#### UNITED FOODS STATION

As a consequence of these unreliable at the best and life threatening at worst ‘incidents’, maybe for fear of the ‘(un)known’ or maybe because it feels more natural to buy products whose name you can read, maybe for the nostalgia that grips you when you’re so far away from your Country...the average expat tends to buy considerable quantities of imported food: meat from Australia and Argentina, UHT milk mostly from France and New Zealand, pasta from Italy and Spain, wines from anywhere but China (the most popular local wine is Dynasty – which foreigners read as “Die Nasty”), imported frozen foods (only if when you get the box out of the supermarket freezer it doesn’t come alive...clear sign that somewhere on its way, it hasn’t been kept at the right temperature and has in the meantime defrosted only to be put in the freezer again ready to be sold), and over the years the



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#### GROCERY SHOPPING CAN BE EDUCATIONAL ...

But of course the imported food area is only a small part of the (super ?)market... the rest is just the best free educational experience you can get... half cows hanging from a hook, chicken feet, dried pig faces,... if your children are young enough you could even tell them you are at the aquarium ... just take them to the fish section where the tanks overflow with sometimes lively (but more often agonizing) fish, turtles and frogs...and, depending on their age I guess, let them experience "how" those creatures go from being their favorite book character to being the second course of your dinner...all live, in front of your eyes, and for free.

#### ...IT IMPROVES YOUR LANGUAGE SKILLS AND KEEPS YOU... CONNECTED

The imported food section displays a variety of brands and foods that immediately improve your knowledge on what other Countries can offer... It doesn't matter that the food content and cooking instructions are written in another language (the paradox is that all those foreign languages you've never studied before like German, French, Spanish all of a sudden don't seem so foreign anymore when compared to mandarin)...it's a matter of survival so you learn pretty soon, and if not...all you need is Google translate... That of course when those contents are legible because, as if it was not challenging enough, the China food authority invariably applies labels with Chinese translation exactly on top of the original instructions or food content information. The issue with those labels is that they are as sticky as the wax you put on your legs when you want to get rid of excess body hair... so when you try to remove them they peel away also the information you NEED to read leaving you with plain ripped brown cardboard to look at.

No panic, "MATER ARTIUM NECESSITAS" the Latins would say ... in most cases, if you do a Google search of the name and brand of your article, you'll find it online, and no labels to take off. All of this, of course, providing you have a VPN, otherwise, thanks to the Great Firewall of China, connecting to Google without it might leave you and your family starving...

#### ...AND IT NEARLY SENDS YOU HOME BANKRUPT

Now, if you come from one of those Countries where you go to a shopping mall or supermarket and are able to buy there 90% of your weekly needs...forget it. Here you soon learn that while there are a variety of places that offer imported articles, none of them has them all, and/or at a cost that will not send you broke. So there is one place better for meat, one more affordable for cleaning and home articles, one for organic fruits and veggies, etc. Doing a complete weekly shopping could take a whole day and a number of taxi trips. So let's say you go to one of these expensive shops, because they have the best, freshest and 'safest' imported meat..., but then you remember you also have to buy 'another couple of things'... if you go down that road you might end up buying toilet paper worth the backside of a king or cereals that will inevitably improve your lazy bowel movements ( my case) upon realizing that you're eating 2 dollars with every mouthful .

And when you finally go home bankrupt, you sneak in like someone that has something to hide... and you DO HIDE the shopping receipt from the ayi (home helper) feeling guilty that, after having argued with her the reasons why you cannot increase her salary, you have just spent half of that amount in one day's grocery shopping.



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