

Will the real chocolate milk please stand up?

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The good news is that people are drinking more milk. On average, global consumption of milk and dairy products is rising by 3% a year. This spikes to closer to 10% in developing countries and 15% in China.

The bad news is that dairy farmers are losing market share as fluid milk is replaced with cheaper, imported milk constituents in products such as ice cream, cheese and, most recently, "dairy beverages".

Rapid technological advances in the 1990's, particularly the use of membrane technology (allowing the separation of milk components) created new classes of products that now compete head to head with fluid milk. Produced at low cost in offshore markets, they are imported into Canada by processors seeking to maximize profits. Many vertically-integrated transnationals looking for a ready market for surplus production.

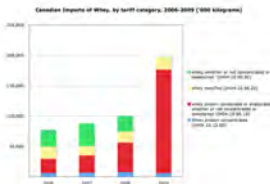
Paying the price are Canada's dairy farmers and consumers.

The ice cream battle has been already lost. Consumers have to look long and hard these days to find ice cream made from real cream.

The cheese war is still in the trenches. Canada's new cheese regulations, which came into effect in December 2008, stipulate the minimum fluid milk content for all classes of cheese sold in Canada. Only cheese can wear the label cheese. Immediately challenged in the Federal Court of Canada by transnational dairy giants Saputo, Parmalat and Kraft, the Court ruled last fall that Canada's regulations — similar to those in most countries that produce quality cheese — are completely legal. An appeal was immediately filed by Saputo and Kraft. It is still before the courts.

Over the past few years, the standby favourite of millions of Canadians - chocolate milk - has become the new battleground.

The industry standard for chocolate milk is 93 percent milk, 6.3 percent sugar, 0.65 percent cocoa powder and 0.05 percent carrageenan, a naturally-sourced emulsifier that keeps the chocolate suspended in the milk. There are no compositional standards for "dairy beverages" — they may contain buttermilk, modified milk ingredients such as whey products, and skim milk powder.



Over the last three years, Canadian net imports of whey protein have jumped by a whopping 616 percent. Flavoured dairy beverage sales are growing by close to 10% a year, and REAL chocolate milk is getting harder and harder to find.

Nutritionally, chocolate dairy beverages have less protein, Vitamin D and calcium than real chocolate milk. In a blind taste test by this columnist (admittedly unscientific; two gasses, three friends) the “imposter” was easily identified by look (the brand we tried was darker), taste (“not as good, almost an under-taste”) and mouth feel (“watery” not creamy).

However, on the supermarket shelf, it is much harder to tell the difference... And therein lies the problem.

In a research study conducted by Dairy Farmers of Canada last summer, the majority of consumers understood that chocolate milk and chocolate dairy beverages were not the same. They had positive associations with chocolate milk and strong negative associations to “milk ingredients” and “modified milk ingredients”. Their purchase intent (what you go into the store to buy) for dairy beverages was low at the outset, and dropped significantly when provided with information about ingredients and milk content levels.



Given this, one would think a savvy consumer going to the store to buy chocolate milk would likely to return home with chocolate milk.



Think again.

If you walk into a supermarket and browse the dairy case, you will often find that chocolate dairy beverage is brazenly displayed in the milk section. And if you look a little longer, you will notice that it has almost displaced real chocolate milk except in small (250 and 500 ml) containers.

What’s more, the packaging and labeling for the two products are virtually identical. Packaged in 1 and 2 litre containers and 3-pack plastic bags, sitting right next to the milk in the dairy case, the consumer can be forgiven for mistaking one for the other.

This happened over the summer to my friend Gladys Millson, a dairy farmer from Ontario. When Jim came in from the barn, he took one look at the carton on the counter and demanded to know “who brought this into the house?” If a dairy farmer can make this mistake, imagine how easy is it for the rest of us? Particularly when “the real thing” has all but disappeared from many retail dairy cases.

The little blue cow on the label isn’t enough. Dairy beverages should be given a separate place in the retail cooler and sport a distinctive label that let the consumer know “if it’s real milk you’re looking for, look again... Cause this isn’t it..

Stay tuned for the Federal Court’s ruling on the Saputo Kraft appeal. And get ready to fight this next one. “Dairy beverages” indeed...

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