

VITALIY BASHYNSKY ON FOOD QUALITY AND SAFETY AND STATE CONTROL IN THE DAIRY INDUSTRY

Vitaly Bashynsky, Head of the Public Council under the State Production and Consumer Service of Ukraine, International FAO Expert on Veterinary Medicine and Food Safety, shared his thoughts on the quality control of raw milk and dairy products, analyzed the reasons for the existence of falsification on Ukrainian dairy market and expressed his vision of ways to eradicate it. He also called on dairy producers to start practical implementation of the requirements of Ukrainian legislation harmonized with European norms, so that with Ukraine's approaching accession to the EU, the country's food business and animal husbandry do not face serious problems.

Everything starts with raw milk

The quality of "industrial" milk versus milk produced in peasants' back yards and sold in the bazaars. How can you explain the devotion of Ukrainian consumers to milk from the bazaar? What does the quality control of milk that goes into processing look like in Ukraine?

Love for products from the bazaar did not appear today. This "disease" affected all the post-Soviet countries without exception. In the USSR, there was food made by the state enterprises and homemade food produced in peasants' households. Imagine what the "state-produced food" was like if we still adore sausages made "in compliance with GOST" (GOST - state standard), although we never even knew what were the requirements of that "GOST" and what the components of that sausage were. In those days when there was no meat on the counters, but only bones and rows of jars of pickles filling the space on the empty shelves, we never wondered where the sausages came from. The USSR fed half of the "social camp". And they fed their own people with "homemade food" sold in the bazaars despite the fact that at that time self-employment was illegal in Ukraine. Now it is about the same.

In fact, during the times of the USSR, people were fed with surplus homemade food products produced by peasants. Under such conditions, there was no sense in thinking about any reputational responsibility or own trademarks. On the contrary, in practice the traces of the real manufacturer were hidden and traceability was not welcomed. This was because this business was illegal. Then it was not fashionable to earn money, it was fashionable to live poor like everyone else. Just at that time, there occurred a loss of the authenticity of the Ukrainian spirit, because the memory of the persecution of the kulaks was deeply rooted in the minds of the hard-working Ukrainian people. It can be said that the USSR destroyed the Ukrainian as a ruler of the food world.

Time passes, but the mental stamp of the division into "industrial" and "homemade" food is still imprinted in people's minds. In Switzerland, food made by enterprises is a well-known but industrially produced "homemade". It is not the same in Ukraine. We are just at the beginning of this journey. We learn to trust those who do not hide their faces and try to convey to the consumer who is the producer of a certain product, how this producer is operating, and how he values his own reputation.

Today, the bazaar remains a place where you can still hide your face, the place where you can sell anything, even food that has not passed basic safety checks. Gullible Ukrainian people even

today buy pig carcasses at the entrances to the subway, considering this meat to be "homemade".

We must remember and respect our past, but we must also learn for the future. At the markets, near the sellers, there should be large posters with the name and surname of the producer, his address, and the invitation to visit the farm and perhaps even his own small shop next to the place he makes his produce. Then I will believe in "homemade" food. For now, I can only believe in what I can study and test.

The culture of production and the culture of consumption is what we have to teach our children because it depends on how long they will live and how high-quality their life will be!

Is there a concept of raw milk quality control at the national level in the Ukrainian dairy industry, i.e. the rules ensuring the quality and safety of milk nationwide? How is the quality of that significant share of milk produced not in the industrial dairy farms controlled?

Milk is a unique product created by nature to feed the weakest and defenseless. Perhaps that is why milk has biological self-preservation mechanisms. Thanks to these mechanisms, milk did not cause a disaster like the Spanish plague.

In Ukraine, milk safety and quality are controlled at all stages of production if these stages are part of official production. That is very good. Control is carried out by the milk producer, milk processor, and the state.

If we mean the quality and comprehensiveness of control, then it is too early to talk about victories. There is still work to be done. And our main goal is to provide traceability to confirm the high reputation of the manufacturer and processor. If we achieve this goal at least halfway, it will be a victory! Control as such will only be a statement of quality, not a way to find a deadly poison.

Food produced outside the official chain from its production to sale and consumption is not controlled at all. Even the number of deaths caused by consumption of unsafe food products that are not controlled is a big mystery because this data is simply neither recorded nor collected.

How is quality control of raw milk produced by family farms ensured? How does it differ from the control that is currently used to ensure the quality of milk produced in peasants' households?

Family farms are a transitional form of management that teaches the village how to become visible. Family farms become visible. This is how they acquire the first sign of reputational responsibility. Farmers themselves can take samples and control indicators of raw milk and finished products in accredited laboratories. And if the owner of the family farm dares deceive someone, then first he deceives himself.

As to the peasants' households, the situation is completely different. They pour milk in an impersonal way into a common vat. It is somehow even inconvenient not to cheat in such a case. The collection of milk from the population is absolutely imperfect and provokes the existence of dozens of severe violations from the point of view of traceability and basic common sense.

The transformation of the use of milk produced in private households will certainly come. The first changes will concern the use of unified utensils, and unified cooling conditions, and milk will not be mixed until the intermediate laboratory results are obtained. Under such conditions, the milk of private peasant households can be equated with that of farmers, but at the same time, it will become much more expensive, which is why it will no longer be supplied for processing. This will give a significant impetus to the emergence of proper reputable craft production and a large number of new food products. This is the blossoming, this is the future. Collecting slop should become a thing of the past.

How do you assess the prospect of milk marketability growth in Ukraine? When is it possible to reach the European level of the indicator?

Marketability, purchasing power, and availability of the foreign market are directly related things. Exports to the EU had an extremely strong impact on two phenomena - the growth of marketability and the replacement of fat in the domestic market. These phenomena are also directly related and their growth was predictable. Monolith butter - to the EU. The removed fat can be replaced with other fat and sold within the country.

Marketability will be slowly increasing. In my opinion, Ukraine's accession to the EU will significantly increase the threat of stagnation in dairy farming. This can happen due to the imperfection of the production, traceability, and control system. But those who adapt first will simply explode with high marketability, quality, and profits.

The transition from state control paid for by the market operator at the level of self-selection of samples to random control on the market at the expense of the state will make the life of falsifiers simply unrealistically difficult and will drive counterfeiting to the illegal bazaars located by the entrances of the subway and to poorly controlled agri-food markets.

There is no place for counterfeiting in the EU, but there is room for new products with honest labeling. Cheese products made without milk. Why not, if it is safe and the labeling contains all the necessary information about it?

Dairy products. Reasons for falsification

What do you consider to be the main reason for the existence of falsification - shortage of raw milk, insufficient quality and safety control of the food products, the inadequacy of penalties for falsification, corruption in the field of dairy product quality control, etc.?

The main reason for the existence of such a phenomenon as falsification is the search for the path of least effort in the desire to obtain the greatest profit. Therefore, all the factors listed in the question are existing in practice.

I would build a strategy to combat the shameful phenomenon of falsification in the following way:

1. Changing the consumer's attitude towards falsification. Raising the awareness of the conscious consumer about the means of detecting fakes.

2. Independent state control based on a risk-oriented principle and a free market approach to sample selection.
3. State control in the full sense of understanding and exclusively with the state source of its financing with the possibility of saving money at the end of the year.
4. Parallel independent public control, the results of which are investigated, and measures are taken in case of confirmation of allegations.

Under these conditions, falsification will become a very rare and unusual phenomenon in the Ukrainian market.

Corruption is a very difficult issue. But society matures, the state begins to understand the value of its own personnel and corruption becomes smaller, but unfortunately, it never disappears completely.

In your opinion, is there such a phenomenon as "professional dignity" among the community of dairy producers, that is, a moral obligation to be honest with consumers, to produce quality products, and to be proud of achievements? What factors encourage some enterprises to produce fakes? What do you think, in case of detection of a forgery, what kind of reaction can falsifiers expect from their colleagues - condemnation, understanding, indifference, sympathy...?

Professional dignity is a quality that is only becoming a valuable asset for society, including the environment of dairy producers. As I have already said, professional dignity means an open face, which, depending on the circumstances, can be spat on or kissed. Therefore, falsifiers usually sign their "products" with a non-real signature. Often, the data of non-existent factories closed, destroyed, or even competitive producers are indicated in the marking. Only the investigation should establish the real manufacturer. For this, there must be political will, tools, and motivation to achieve the goal. Let's not forget the corruption. And then we take the already mentioned 4 important steps and go to victory together with the consumer.

So far, a successful forgery causes only envy among colleagues and attempts to catch up with the thieves in their skill at fooling and making money. But I emphasize that this does not apply to enterprises with a clean and impeccable reputation. They feel disgust to this phenomenon and want to achieve justice and truth.

Ukrainian consumers should value the reputation of their favorite producers and trust them. Under such conditions, the producer will never cheat.

The question of what motivates counterfeiters can be answered simply - it is the thirst for profit and impunity in the face of a weak system of public and state control. Another important point is the low purchasing power of the population and the desire of counterfeiters to occupy the cheapest shelves without losing the cost margin.

The war is also a factor that plays into the hands of falsifiers: a moratorium on checks, weakened control and an increased level of trust in the production of Ukrainian-made produce. Against this background, the falsifier looks like an insolent pest or parasite.

Why, in your opinion, the measures of control that are periodically introduced by state bodies in the field of food safety and quality do not give a noticeable result and falsification continues to be a problem?

State control is limited by several factors that almost completely nullify its results:

- Distrust on the part of consumers
- Mistrust on the part of the own Government
- Mistrust on the part of law enforcement agencies

Total mistrust makes government control toxic and ineffective. Even in the conditions of making correct steps in terms of implementation of state control, everything sinks into mistrust. Even coverage of checks through messengers and chats does not increase the level of trust. When, wanting to protect business, a moratorium is imposed on inspections carried out by allegedly "voracious government control", it destroys trust. That is, we have a situation where the "head" does not trust its own "tail" looking insidious and scary. I believe that the Government and the President can change state control so that moratoriums on inspections become unnecessary so that state control strengthens the potential of production.

Would you say it's impossible? It is definitely possible! The respect of all bona fide market participants for the competent authority and measures of state control will make the control itself effective. In this case, criminals and falsifiers will have no place in the transparent market. They will move to spontaneous trade and the markets of small towns and villages.

European standards of safety and quality control

It is known that in Ukraine a few years ago there began harmonization of relevant legislative norms and procedures related to quality and safety control with the practices adopted in the EU. At what stage is Ukraine now in this process? What path has already been taken, and what has already been implemented? Can we already say that the European system of monitoring the quality and safety of milk and dairy products operates in the country?

At the level of the regulatory field, we have really achieved high results. According to various estimates, the level of convergence of Ukrainian and EU legislation ranges from 75 to 85%. This is an extremely great achievement.

At the level of practice, it looks completely different! Practice is adapted by 5-7%, and this is only about sectoral achievement. By answering simple questions, we will understand why:

- Do we have a European approach to the organization and financing of state control?
- NO.
- Do we have a European inspector with an in-depth value system, with continuous professional development and high evaluation in society at the level of salary and respect?
- NO.
- Are we waiting for an inspector to help us figure out the reporting and tell us how to avoid problems and improve production efficiency?
- NO.
- Do we try to be as transparent as possible in order to maintain a high level of our own reputation, do we introduce multi-level traceability systems?

- NO.

- Are we trying to understand world trends and introduce new approaches in terms of animal welfare, production hygiene, do we use the state as a guide in this direction?

- NO.

I will not continue. Answers YES to the above questions will be indicators of the practical implementation of the legislation that has already been adopted in Ukraine and will come into force in 2026. If by this time we come close to EU membership, it will mean the end of 50% of the Ukrainian food business and 60% of livestock farming. And this is a very big risk. On the one side, gluttonous Russia, and on the other demanding EU. Checkmate.

But I am sure - there is always a way out.

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