

Strengthen Food Safety for 2008 Olympic Games

As the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games drawing closer, food safety is once again put on the agenda. As a matter of fact, the Beijing Olympic Games Organizing Committee keeps close eyes on the food safety for 2008 Olympic Games since China won the bid. As host city, Beijing will cater to over 10,000 athletes and more than half a million international visitors from August to September next year. After the Olympic Games wrap up in mid-August, the Paralympics will begin in the following month.

On the other hand, in recent months, international alarm bells have sounded over the risks posed by Chinese food in the wake of some scandals involving major consumers such as United States. Reports on pet food, toothpaste and farmed fish tainted with potentially dangerous chemicals from china aroused concern about the way which food is produced, regulated and monitored in China, especially with the Olympic games just on the way.

Against this background, how does Beijing do with the food safety problems? What has it done to safeguard the food safety during the Olympic Games and what is it like now? With theses questions, I, through the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games Organizing Committee, made some telephone and e-mail interviews on two persons concerned on November 9, 2007.

According to Beijing Health Bureau, during the Olympic Games estimated food consumptions at the Olympic Village are 75,000 liters of milk, 750 liters of ketchup, 330 tons of vegetables and fruits, 131 tons of meats, 82 tons of sea food, 21tons of cheese and 3 million bottles of drinks, respectively, which are pretty large figures. To keep their safety and secure supply, they must deal with it from the very beginning and the root.

For Guo Changjun, surprise visits from food safety inspectors became a potluck of life long ago. Guo, who manages an organic farm in Beijing near the Badaling section of the Great Wall, says pressures to increases safety levels has been mounting for years.

“Chinese people care more about their health now and even farmers are not willing to use chemical pesticides, because it sell bad if they do so”, said Guo, whose farm is under extreme scrutiny as it is one of the official food suppliers for the Games.

“The government and our suppliers have been paying a lot more attention to this issue over the past years”, he told me.

To ensure food safety city and Olympic officials have already implemented strict regulations on China’s food production and distribution networks. One of the key measures is to set up an Olympic Food Tracing System, a mechanism to monitor the production, processing, packaging, transportation and distribution. As a matter of fact, this tracing system put into practice on August 8, 2007 in both English and Chinese for the 10 Olympic test events in Beijing.

“According to expert, the tracing system is a very important part of Beijing’s food safety inspection system because it can help control every step in the food production course”, Guo cited an expert as saying, referring the tracing system.

The expert Guo referred to just now is Professor Cai Tongyi, a consultant of the Beijing Olympic Food Safety Consulting Committee, which was established in 2005 with 15 experts, about half of them drawn from international organizations. Also, Cai is a consultant of China’s National Food and Nutrition Consulting Committee, vice-chairman of China Green Food Association, standing director of China Institute of Food Science and Technology, director of Beijing Society of Food Science, and member of Chinese Science Committee in Danone Nutrition Center of France. Due to Guo’s farm relates closely to Cai, they get well along with each other and Guo has high respect to Cai.

Under the food tracing system, firstly, suppliers put tracking information labels on the products. Secondly, the transportation process is monitored by GPS. The temperature and humidity at which the food is stored is supervised, too. Thirdly, after a final quality check,

food is sent to the kitchen at the Olympic Village. And fourthly, if any food poisoning occurs, the tracing system can take effect in 10 minutes, tracking the source and removing the tainted food.

Guo's organic farm is already a part of the ambitious new system, added traceable bar codes to all of its products that contain such information as when, where and by who the food was produced.

"If any problems are detected, just a telephone call can get to the root of the matter and any offenders shall hold the responsible for the problems", Guo said, adding that he has a sense of pressure.

As it is the first time for them to host such Games of this kind, the Beijing organizers pay attention to even a small detail. "The Games organizers have very high standards. We have already assigned workers for each planting area and you won't find any pesticides in any of our vegetables", Guo said at the last, with full confidence.

Now that they can keep food safety and a safe supply from the root, then how they can ensure the food safety in the course of preparation? Chef Zhang Jingan shares his views and experiences.

Recently Beijing Health Bureau inspected 21,000 restaurants out of 35,000 in the city and graded them on food safety respectively. Around 1, 596 reached the Grade A level, the highest standard, while 735 failed to qualify for food safety standards. As for the 113 Olympic contracted hotels, the Bureau said all of them must meet the Grade A standard before the Game.

The Grand Hotel is among such wave of restaurants in the capital tasked with upgrading their working conditions to meet international standards ahead of the Beijing Games. As chef that has prepared Chinese food at the hotel for 17 years at the food and beverage department,

Zhang Jingan now has to overwork to do more paperwork for the purpose of stricter safety controls. He was ordered to keep meticulous notebooks recording his operations recently.

“At first we weren’t used to doing so much paperwork everyday. But now we are getting used to it. We are aware that we have to be stricter in terms of our cooking routines to maintain high standards”, Zhang explained.

This Chinese-style boutique hotel which is adjacent to the Forbidden City will become one of the homes to International Olympic Committee officials, Olympic Family members and Olympic sponsors during the Games. It will provide roughly 170 rooms and host press conferences. “It is a pretty big challenge for us to cater so many distinguished guests for that length of time”, said Zhang.

Zhang’s department is mainly responsible for ensuring that guests enjoy food which not only meets international health standards, but also covers a range of local cuisines with Chinese characteristics.

According to his introduction, the hotel hopes that introducing the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) program into its daily operations will efficiently advance its service. HACCP is a systematic preventive approach to food safety. It identifies potential food safety hazards, so that key actions, known as Critical Control Points (CCP’s) in this theory can be taken to reduce or eliminate fundamentally the risk of the hazards. This system is explored at all stages of food production and preparation.

“In order to qualify, now my colleagues and I have to record every detail about hundreds of Chinese ingredients, dishes and even cooking methods, including their shelf life, cooking time and the temperature”, added Zhang.

“In traditional Chinese cooking, we chefs do not need to follow very strict rules but depend more on our experience and feelings, so it is quite difficult to control the overall quality of

Chinese. After introducing the HACCP system, every kitchen at our hotel has at least two big notebooks recording our daily operations,” Zhang continued, with a kind of helplessness.

According to Zhang, there is a quality control in the basement of the hotel testing samples of the food and dishware every day. And some lab officials will randomly drop by to check what is going on at the restaurant and kitchens.

Though the hotel passed the HACCP verification tests on June 15, 2007, Zhang’s department still gets surprise spot check by the verification organization. “We must keep the program operating at the same level or else we will lose the HACCP certificate. But it is a good thing for us, after all we are a hotel that will cater to international distinguished guests from home and abroad during the Olympic Game. This is what we should do and it is our pleasure to host such world-class games”, Zhang smiled.

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