

MARKET NEWS

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MÉRIEUX NUTRISCIENCES CHINA

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Focus on China

Ensuring safety and transparency in 'pre-made' food

'Different strokes for different folks' applies as much to dining as to anything else. Food preferences are not just about flavors; they are also about where the ingredients come from, how they are processed, and what cooking methods are used. Which of these details should be disclosed to consumers is not only a marketing decision for many restaurants but also a regulatory question. Left unchecked, incomplete or misleading information could spark disputes, damage trust and even raise food safety concerns.

The controversy over "pre-made" dishes in China shows just how divisive this issue has become. Some diners welcome convenience, while others reject the lack of wok hei (the smoky freshness of stir-fry). Yet whichever side people are on, one thing is clear: they prefer to be kept "well-informed".

However, there is a sharp perception gap between what consumers seek and what restaurant operators offer. Equally important, legislation on food product labeling has not kept pace with the fast-paced changes in the food and agricultural industries; there isn't even a consensus on what exactly counts as a pre-made dish.

The rising sales of premade dishes in China can be attributed to the rapid industrialization of the dining sector. To meet the demand for

speedy service, and a wide variety and scale of dishes, restaurants nowadays increasingly rely on semi-finished dishes sourced from their "central kitchens". These dishes are stored, shipped and reheated in branch outlets. The same model powers meal delivery platforms, where standardized packs dominate. Frozen and/or shelf-stable pre-prepared meals have entered households across the country.

But despite the growing efficiency of the industry, consumer concerns have increased. In practice, restaurateurs tend not to see their offerings as pre-made. But consumers often do, because they focus on how the food is sourced and prepared.

This clash of perspectives matters. A dish that comes out of the kitchen is a "restaurant meal", regardless of whether its sauce was mixed and packaged in a factory. Yet outsourcing preparatory work changes the essence of the meal. It affects price, freshness, and even the cultural meaning of a dish. Globally, food law has increasingly tilted toward this process-oriented approach, demanding transparency in areas from irradiated and genetically modified foods to organic labels.

How, then, should pre-made dishes be regulated? The answer depends on whether we treat them as a product or a process. If they are treated as products, legislators could adopt a "menu-style" approach while drafting regulations, and setting specific rules for each type of pre-made dish. But given the diversity of Chinese cuisine,

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it would be impractical and stifling. Instead, broad rules on additives, hygiene and labeling, already applied to packaged foods, would be more realistic.

If the focus is on the process, consumers would want to know whether the dishes they ordered were made from scratch or prepared industrially, not because one is inherently safer, but because it reflects values such as sustainability, tradition, taste and price sensitivity. And process transparency allows consumers to make meaningful choices, much like organic or fair-trade labels do.

Both approaches have to follow a common principle: the labels must not be misleading. The government recognizes the importance of pre-made food as an industry. The 2023 "No. 1 central document" explicitly encouraged its growth, and the government is working to set national standards. With the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) to be implemented next year, some local governments, too, are building industrial bases to boost the production of pre-made dishes. For policymakers, the challenge is to nurture this economic opportunity while safeguarding consumer trust.

To do that, however, the companies need to adhere to the principle of transparency. Voluntary labeling by businesses can help even niche consumer groups, which have higher expectations, make informed choices, and could even allow restaurants to position themselves as different from others.



But bridging the gap between public perception and professional definition requires more than just rules. It calls for sustained communication about what is pre-made food and what is not. Done right, regulations can ensure consumer choice and trust, industrial innovation and cultural confidence all grow together.

China grants market access to 15 food categories from Belt and Road countries

SHANGHAI -- China's General Administration of Customs (GAC) on Wednesday granted market access to 15 categories of food products from 10 countries, including South Africa and Belarus, paving the way for more food products from Belt and Road countries to reach Chinese dining tables at a faster pace.

The move was announced at a conference on the import and export food safety cooperation mechanism for Belt and Road countries held in Shanghai.

In recent years, the food trade has become a new highlight in China's trade with Belt and Road countries. In the first three quarters of this year, China's food trade with these countries reached 915.24 billion yuan (about \$128.92 billion), up 2.5 percent year-on-year.

Since the establishment of the Import & Export Food Safety Cooperation Mechanism for the Countries of the Belt and Road

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Initiative in 2023, notable progress has been achieved, said Sun Meijun, head of the GAC, at the conference.

"Thanks to the green channels for fresh and perishable goods, Thai durians can now reach Chinese markets within just 13 hours, while Chinese cold-water salmon can arrive in the Indonesian market in only 39 hours," Sun added.

Xibei PR disaster a blessing in disguise for food industry

The outcome of a catering company's PR mistake might bode well for China's pre-prepared or premade meal sector. The national food safety standards for premade dishes, for which consultations began at the height of a public opinion crisis, signal more stable growth prospects for the sunrise industry.

Last month, a viral post by an internet influencer criticizing well-known restaurant chain Xibei for "using premade dishes and charging high prices" sparked an intense backlash. The company's own series of misguided defenses, now a classic case study in PR failure, compounded its predicament while dealing collateral damage to China's premade meal industry and the broader catering sector.

Founded in the late 1990s, Xibei had long been regarded as a benchmark in China's catering industry. With nearly 400 outlets and an annual revenue of more than 6 billion yuan (\$841.19 million), it has been seen as a pioneer in standardizing and scaling Chinese cuisine.

That such a successful company mishandled what was considered a manageable issue, leading to an uncontrollable crisis, belies its reputation.

Undoubtedly, the Xibei incident will leave a mark on the history of China's catering industry, particularly the premade meal sector. Had the company used a more prudent PR strategy, it might have contained the damage. However, with national standards not yet set, the high-stakes debate, though costly to Xibei's reputation, was effectively a large-scale opinion poll. And despite its immediate impact, it will benefit the industry's long-term development.

The controversy surrounding Xibei centers on whether restaurants should serve premade dishes, how to define prepared dishes, how to ensure they are healthy and how to prevent such dishes from being passed off as freshly cooked. Yet such scrutiny shouldn't drive blanket rejection of premade dishes.

The development of the premade dish sector constitutes a national strategy, integrating the primary, secondary and tertiary industries. China's premade meal market approached 500 billion yuan in 2024, with a year-on-year growth of more than 30 percent. It is projected to exceed 600 billion yuan this year. Notably, its 15 percent penetration rate remains far below the 60 percent in the United States and Japan, indicating its massive growth potential.

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However, as an originally foreign concept, pre-prepared dishes face adaptation challenges in China. Taking pride in the combination of color, aroma and taste, Chinese culinary culture emphasizes the complex artistry and aesthetic of freshly cooked dishes. Industrial preparation inevitably conflicts with values associated with naturalness, freshness, and handcrafted quality, creating cultural barriers to adoption.

Broadly defined, modern premade meals are believed to have originated during World War II as portable rations for soldiers. In developed economies, postwar fast-paced lifestyles led working women to shorten cooking time, thereby spurring demand for fast food. The proliferation of convenience stores provided retail channels for premade dishes, accelerating consumer market maturation. Later, the stringent requirements of fast-food giants like McDonald's for ingredient standardization, efficiency, and stable supply created an ideal market for businesses.

In China, however, premade meals took a different path, first emerging in the B2B market. The opening of KFC at Qianmen, Beijing, in 1987 was perhaps the starting point for the spread of Western fast food in the Chinese mainland. By the turn of the century, local chain restaurants began to increase, experimenting with standardized operations. As labor, rent and other costs increased — especially with the rise of food delivery — premade dishes became an important tool for catering businesses to reduce costs and improve efficiency. Only

during the COVID-19 pandemic did they enter households, having long remained hidden in commercial kitchens.

In earlier developed markets, retail packaging with ingredient and production information served as consumer education, teaching people how to select and prepare such meals. Chinese consumers largely encountered premade dishes passively and unknowingly, whether at restaurants or in delivery boxes. Worse, lacking clear standards and effective supervision, a small number of unscrupulous businesses sold low-quality premade meals while some restaurants marketed reheated premade meals as freshly cooked dishes, cementing the impression that premade dishes are inexpensive meal kits.

That's why the imminent issuing of the national food safety standards for prepared dishes led by National Health Commission is very important. The standards will regulate categorization, ingredients, processing techniques, storage, transportation and inspection methods for premade meals, ensuring the healthy development of the industry while safeguarding consumer dietary rights.

Crucially, premade dishes will receive standardized identification, with restaurant usage and application methods falling under mandatory disclosure requirements. This will help premade dishes shed their invisibility cloak and legitimately enter the Chinese lifestyle scene.

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China announces guideline to standardize ingredients procurement in school canteens

China has rolled out a guideline to standardize the procurement and inspection of bulk food ingredients in school canteens nationwide to strengthen the management of campus food safety.

The guideline, issued by the Ministry of Education and the State Administration for Market Regulation on Thursday, said schools are required to select qualified suppliers of bulk ingredients based on opinions from parents and faculty. Suppliers must possess legitimate business qualifications, ensure their product quality meets national standards, and have not been involved in any food safety incidents or placed on a serious dishonesty list within the last three years, it said.

The guideline mandates strict inspection procedures for procured ingredients to guarantee traceability and safety. The purchase of food and raw materials should adhere to principles of safety, health, and nutritional adequacy, with unqualified ingredients prohibited, it said.

A two-person or multi-person joint inspection mechanism is required during acceptance checks, which should be conducted collectively and transparently. Unqualified ingredients must be rejected or destroyed on the spot, with records kept accurately. The guideline encourages regions with the capability to establish digital platforms for bulk ingredient procurement and promote electronic management of documentation, the guideline said.

Schools must maintain detailed management archives and strengthen professional training for canteen staff to ensure food safety responsibilities are fulfilled, it said.

The guideline clarified the supervisory roles of the education and market regulation departments. Schools must implement a principal-responsibility system for campus food safety, include food safety in key meeting agendas, and hold at least one on-site meeting per semester in the canteen.

School leaders in primary and secondary schools and kindergartens should eat with students in canteens, upholding the public welfare and non-profit nature of school canteens and improving information disclosure regarding bulk ingredients, it added.

International News

Suspected fraud alerts in Europe increase

The number of fraud and non-compliance discussions in Europe went up in August compared to the month before. Three reports involved the United States.

There were 166 reports in August, compared to 136 in July, 164 in June, and 129 in May.

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Issues listed are potential frauds. Non-compliance may lead to investigations by authorities in EU member states. Details come from a monthly report published by the European Commission.

Data includes suspected cross-border fraud topics shared between members of the Alert and Cooperation Network (ACN).

A total of 38 reports mentioned dietetic foods, food supplements and fortified foods. Second was confectionery with 14 notices while fruit and vegetables were third with 11.

The majority of issues were uncovered through market controls. On 10 occasions, the method of detection was a company's internal inspection and 19 times it was a consumer complaint. Two problems were detected from whistleblower information.

August highlights

Three alerts involved the United States in August. They were steviol glucosides in a flavored drink; acesulfame K and sucralose in lemonade; and yohimbine in food supplements.

Examples of adulteration were beef in horse meat from Poland and other vegetable oils in extra virgin olive oil from Greece.

Titanium dioxide, mostly in sweets, was a common problem. Three notifications were for ethylene oxide in products from India. Sudan 2 was found in a curry powder from the Netherlands.

Record tampering incidents included gluten in gluten-free meatballs from Denmark and alleged fraudulent use of another operator's identification for supplements in Spain.

Under the theme of traceability defects, there was suspected forgery of origin of pistachio kernels from Turkey instead of Iran as well as eggs from a non-EU origin labeled with an EU producer code. Another issue was a label and document mismatch of duck meat from China and rice from Vietnam.

An unauthorized operator was the reason for a few alerts. This included supplements in Germany, beef ribs in Hungary and sausages in Austria.

Food products from Afghanistan were transported in unsuitable conditions and there was an attempt to illegally import products of animal origin from Moldova.

Several non-compliances listed ingredients not authorized in the EU, items skipping border controls, as well as residues of veterinary medicines and pesticides above the maximum residue limits (MRL).

EU cinnamon study finds safety and fraud issues

An analysis of cinnamon on the European market has discovered fraud and potential safety issues.

Scientists said the problem requires attention given the projected increase of the global cinnamon market.

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The analysis involved 104 cinnamon samples purchased at retailers in 10 EU countries, and in the UK, Serbia, and Sri Lanka. Stick and ground samples were mainly from Sri Lanka but also from Madagascar, Vietnam, India, and Indonesia. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has recently enacted import certifications and alerts on cinnamon from certain areas of Indonesia because samples have shown radioactive contamination.

Scientists from the Joint Research Centre (JRC), the European Commission's science and knowledge agency, used four internally developed screening methods.

In 2023, cinnamon was the fifth most imported spice in the EU. There are two main types: Ceylon cinnamon, native to Sri Lanka, and Cassia, native to Myanmar, a cheaper and lower quality alternative with a stronger taste, which naturally contains coumarin, a compound which is potentially toxic for the liver.

Up to 9 percent of the samples labeled as Ceylon cinnamon were totally or partially substituted by Cassia cinnamon. Ceylon is about twice as expensive as cassia.

Lead safety findings

More than 66 percent of the samples failed to meet international quality standards, were non-compliant with EU food safety legislation, were suspected of fraud, or potentially exceeded legal coumarin limits.

Results can help the scientific community and policymakers to set threshold values for the different cinnamon components, and to define when to consider a sample as suspicious. The JRC said this will allow for more detailed surveillance and help authorities to act.

The study showed that 10 samples did not comply with the maximum limit of 2 mg lead per kilogram of cinnamon in European food safety legislation and 31 samples were potentially hazardous for children due to a high coumarin content.

Nineteen samples had a high chromium level, ranging from 2 to 20 mg kg. However, European legislation on contaminants does not have maximum limits for this compound.

Results were published in the [journal npj Science of Food](#). Researchers said the processing and supply chain of spices is complex, long, and globalized, and fraud can take place in any stage.

Fraud, such as substitution of bark by other parts of the cinnamon tree like roots, leaves, and flowers, were suspected in several samples. Also, about 21 percent of samples failed to meet international standards because of a high total ash content.

Some findings could be because of cross-contamination issues, poor processing practices, or the result of fraudulent substitution.

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Thirteen samples had a high content of sulfur and would be potentially non-compliant with maximum limits for sulfur dioxide-sulfites.

FDA Publishes Agricultural Water FAQs and Information on FDA's Implementation of the Pre-harvest Agricultural Water Requirements under the FSMA Produce Safety Rule

Today, the FDA posted new [frequently asked questions \(FAQs\)](#) related to the agricultural water requirements in the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule, as well as updated information on how it will implement the pre-harvest agricultural water requirements. These efforts are part of FDA's continued commitment to engagement and collaboration with stakeholders to improve science-based strategies to prevent foodborne illness from produce.

As shown through outbreak investigations, agricultural water can be a major conduit of pathogens that contaminate produce. As such, the FSMA Produce Safety Rule establishes requirements related to agricultural water. In May 2024, FDA published a final rule that revised certain requirements for [pre-harvest agricultural water](#) for covered produce (other than sprouts). These systems-based requirements are in addition to those that were already in place for [harvest and post-harvest agricultural water](#).



[The FAQs](#) were developed to provide information about the agricultural water requirements based on topics covered in the final rules, including the following:

- Inspection and maintenance of agricultural water systems,
- Pre-harvest agricultural water assessments (including testing as part of an assessment and assessment outcomes),
- Harvest and post-harvest agricultural water requirements,
- Corrective and mitigation measures, and
- Agricultural water treatment.

In addition to these new FAQs, FDA is also collaborating with industry on the development of a forthcoming best practices document for managing agricultural water.

Compliance dates for the pre-harvest agricultural water requirements for covered produce (other than sprouts) are staggered based on farm size, beginning on April 7, 2025, for large farms. Compliance dates for the harvest and post-harvest agricultural water requirements have passed for all farms.

The FDA is also releasing updated information about how it plans to implement the pre-harvest agricultural water provisions of the Produce Safety Rule. The [updated information](#) focuses on the key elements of the agency's approach to FSMA implementation, including education (for both industry and regulators), industry

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training, technical assistance, inspections, and compliance, both domestically and internationally. The agency is committed to taking an “educate before and while we regulate” approach to supporting compliance with the pre-harvest agricultural water requirements. The FDA continues to work closely with state regulators, educators, industry partners, and others as these requirements are implemented.

Enterprise News

Cheese recalled in Canada because government testing showed Listeria

Maison Gabriel Coulet brand Roquefort – La Cave is under recall after government testing showed contamination with *Listeria monocytogenes*.

The implicated cheese was sold in Quebec and Ontario, according to the recall notice posted by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

The recalled cheese can be identified by the following label information:

Maison Gabriel Coulet Roquefort – La Cave sliced wedges in 100-gram packages with the UPC number 8 22775 00337 2, Lot 180825, and a Best Before date of 2025 NO 03.



As of the posting of the recall notice, there had been no reports of confirmed illnesses in relation to the cheese.

HelloFresh recalls meals due to Listeria

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is issuing a public health alert for FSIS-inspected ready-to-eat meals produced by FreshRealm containing a Food and Drug Administration regulated ingredient, specifically spinach, that may be contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*.

FSIS expects additional affected products to be identified and will update this public health alert as more information becomes available. Consumers should check back frequently. FSIS is concerned that these products may be in consumers’ refrigerators or freezers.

The following products are subject to the public health alert [[view labels](#)]:

- 10.1-oz. containers of “HELLO FRESH READY MADE MEALS CHEESY PULLED PORK PEPPER PASTA” with establishment number “Est. 47718” and lot code 49107 or establishment number “Est. 2937” and lot code 48840. This item was shipped directly to consumers by HelloFresh.
- 10-oz. containers of “HELLO FRESH READY MADE MEALS UNSTUFFED PEPPERS WITH GROUND TURKEY” with establishment number “P-47718” and lot codes 50069, 50073,

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or 50698. This item was shipped directly to consumers by HelloFresh.

The problem was discovered when FreshRealm notified FSIS that the spinach used in these products tested positive for *Listeria monocytogenes*.

Consumption of food contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes* can cause listeriosis, a serious infection that primarily affects older adults, persons with weakened immune systems, and pregnant women and their newborns. Less commonly, persons outside these risk groups are affected. It can take up to 70 days for symptoms of *Listeria* infection to develop.

Michigan company recalling dog chews because of Salmonella contamination

Best Buy Bones Inc. is recalling dog chews because of *Salmonella*, which can pose a danger to pets and the people who handle the treats.

The Nature's Own Pet Chews Bully Bites are packaged in one-pound bags and have an expiration date September 2027.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the affected products were distributed after Sept. 23 and sold in retail outlets across Wisconsin, with further distribution stemming from Minnesota.

For dogs, signs of infection can manifest as lethargy, fever, vomiting, loss of appetite, or diarrhea. Notably, some dogs may appear healthy yet can still transmit the bacteria to humans or other animals. Pet owners who observe these symptoms in their dogs are advised to reach out to their veterinarians promptly.

The specific recalled products can be identified by their UPC code 739598900750. They are sold in 16-ounce resealable plastic bags marked with a "Best by" date of September 2027 on the bottom tag. The lot numbers under recall are 19379, 19380, 19381 and 19382.

Consumers who have purchased the recalled Bully Bites are advised not to feed these treats to their pets. Instead, they should return the items to the place of purchase or safely dispose of them to prevent access by pets, children and other animals. Additionally, it is highly recommended that pet owners thoroughly wash their hands, feeding bowls, and food storage containers after handling the affected treats.

For further inquiries, consumers can contact Best Buy Bones at 810-687-2106.

Foster Poultry Farms recalls almost 4 million pounds of corndogs after consumer complaints of injuries

Foster Poultry Farms LLC of Livingston, CA, is recalling more than 3.8 million pounds of chicken corn dog products that may be contaminated with extraneous material, specifically pieces of wood

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embedded in the batter, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) announced today.

The products subject to recall were produced between July 30, 2024, and Aug. 4, 2025. To view a full list of the products, click here. The labels for the impacted products can be found here: view labels.

The products subject to recall bear establishment number "P-6137B" either inside the USDA mark of inspection or printed on the packaging. These items were shipped to retail and institutional locations nationwide, including Department of Defense and USDA Commodity Foods donations. While the products were distributed to schools, it resulted from commercial sales and not part of food provided by the USDA for the National School Lunch Program.

The problem was discovered after FSIS received a consumer complaint involving an injury from consumption of these products. Additionally, the establishment received multiple consumer complaints, 5 of which involved injuries. Anyone concerned about an injury should contact a healthcare provider.

FSIS is concerned that some products may be in consumers' refrigerators and freezers, along with institution refrigerators and freezers. Consumers and institutions who have purchased these products are urged not to consume them. These products should be thrown away or returned to the place of purchase.



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