

Fried fish fear follows black bean ban

Contributed by Thingfish
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Imagine the uproar if Bush banned burgers or Blair barred baked beans. Such is the shock that has followed the news that Hong Kong supermarkets have been told to withdraw a local delicacy from their shelves.

Shoppers are running in fear as newspapers whip up a frenzy over cancerous canned carp. Well this reporter says the time has come to make a stand against the food nazis and declare "No! We will not be intimidated!"

Hong Kong shoppers last week ran in fear as newspapers whipped up a three-day frenzy over cancerous canned carp. Imagine the uproar that would erupt if Bush banned burgers or Blair barred baked beans. Such is the shock that has followed the news that Hong Kong supermarkets have been told to withdraw a local delicacy from their shelves. Every day, millions of people around the world take the easy catering option and reach for a can of beans or a chewy dogburger. But not me. While I'll always have a soft sport for a can of beans, my last-minute chowdown of choice is Pearl River Bridge Fried Dace With Salted Black Beans.

Pearl River Bridge Fried Dace With Salted Black Beans. A salty, oily paradise on a plate. Even adds taste to pak choi. Throw some rice in the steamer, fry up any vegetable that comes to hand, and pop a can of this stuff into the microwave. If you're feeling really adventurous, you can chop up the dace and mix it with some leafy vegetable and impress your family with your hitherto hidden culinary skills. It doesn't have to be Pearl River Bridge. There are so many copycat brands, it's easy to grab the wrong one when you're in the supermarket - Eagle Coin, Jumbo, Yupin, Baoli, Golden Dragon - but Pearl River is the clear leader and market favourite. It doesn't even have to be served in black beans. There are varieties with curry, chilli, tofu, pepper, Chinese olives or just extra oil, but just as Pearl River Bridge is my choice of all the brands, their black bean flavour is the mother of all mud carp. So what is this revolting looking black stuff? For the benefit of the uninitiated, Dace in Black Bean is a staple of a million Hong Kong kitchen cupboards. It has a bit of a reputation as a low-class consumable, and I know few people who'll admit to enjoying it, but whatever the reputation, this is one of the tastiest treats you'll find in any canned food section. In the words of Zhongshang Baoli Foodstuffs, one of the better-known dace makers, fried dace is "characterized by natural tint, tight texture and delicious taste"; It is actually optimum for household use, travel and present.

Like many of the best recipes, dace in black beans is a simple food: Two or three dried, salted mud carp, soaked in a mixture of salty fermented black soya beans, soy sauce, secret spices and some kind of vegetable oil. It could be sump oil, but if it is, then it's salted sump oil. In short, it's heart-disease in a can. In one meal, you get more salt than your body can safely digest in a month, a concentration of pollutants that can only come from a Chinese river, and several desert-spoons full of oil. It's a heart attack, ulcers and bowel cancer, all in one handy portable package. That's fine by my digestive system, because it's not something I'd want to eat every day. But thanks to the Hong Kong government's insistence on its right to interfere in Hong Kong kitchens, it's a food you soon may not be able to eat at all. In August, the government as is its wont, followed the lead of governments elsewhere and banned the import of foods containing malachite green - an industrial dye often used to protect fish from parasites.

The following month, retailers were quietly asked to withdraw three batches of canned fish found to contain the chemical. Despite passing a law against it just a month earlier, authorities were so unconcerned about the health impact, they didn't bother telling the public until last week, and even then, they tried to avoid mentioning the suspect foods by name. The Standard listed the accused brands as Pearl River Bridge, Yu Pin Mei Cai and Gulong, while the South China Morning Post translated the latter pair as Royal and Koolung. The Chinese press, not surprisingly, were all over the story like a tumour. Apple Daily gave the fish a big splash The Sun put two culprits on display - Yupin (L) and Pearl River Bridge (R)

Incidentally, the news prompted Guangdong Foodstuffs, the makers of Yupin dace, to issue a broadside against the makers of Pearl River Bridge Fried Dace. In China's chaotic world of intellectual property, it's not unusual for several state firms to share a single trademark. Interesting that. I'd always wondered why the sauces had a hologram but the dace didn't. Guangdong Foodstuffs didn't actually deny the fact their fish had been named as well. The South China Morning Post followed up on the government's admission with the breathless revelation that a woman calling a radio phone-in had bought four cans after the withdrawal. 'This is unbelievable. What if I caught cancer?' the panicking shopper had asked. What the Post failed to note was that the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department has calculated that "significant adverse health effects due to MG are not expected even when a person consumes up to 290 kg of freshwater fish each day".

Now, I like a bit of fish as much as anyone, but 290 kilograms in a day? That's enough for 1,576 tins of fried dace. Actually, it makes even more, since the oil doesn't contain malachite green. So in order to suffer any adverse health effects from my favourite tea-time snack, you'd have to force your face through a tin a minute for 24 hours. By that point it's probably safe to assume, you may not be a healthy gourmet. So if the Post's concerned citizen should see this article, madam, don't worry, you've got another 1,572 cans to get through today without any risk of catching cancer. Besides, is cancer such a bad thing? How many foods don't cause cancer? Salt causes cancer, and so does sugar. That healthy glass of milk? Cancer. A nice beer or a

glass of wine? Cancer. Meat's an invitation for carcinoma, especially when it's cooked. Potatoes will kill you in no time, particularly when fried. Dim sum? Cancer. Cantonese food? What do you think?

In fact, if you eat anything that originates in China, you're almost certain to be ingesting cancerous additives not intended for human consumption. There's bleach in noodles, parasites in kimchi, pesticides in vegetables, everything imaginable in canned meat - it's a wonder anyone ever leaves a Chinese restaurant alive. There's a million varieties of dace in black bean, but only three of them got caught. Clockwise from top left; Pearl River Bridge, Yupin, Eagle Coin, Baoli, Jumbo and Golden Dragon. Can you spot the evil fish?