



On Wednesday the 10th of March 2013, Jasper Aykroyd AKA Bacon Wizard attended a stakeholder's meeting at Noble House in London: The Headquarters of the Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs. Subject du jour was the move by Brussels to ban use of saltpetre and nitrites in the organic curing of meats. It has been something of a surprise to the EU that certain producers in The UK object loudly to these proposals; the committee in Brussels probably feel they are doing the right thing. Bless.

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing indeed.

No surprise that your friendly Bacon Wizard has strong views, and was determined to make them heard. Thanks to Robin Fransella from DEFRA, they were indeed heard loud and clear. There was agreement and welcome support from the UK's industry leaders, food technologists, legal experts and government departments. Saltpetre has been instrumental in the successful curing of artisan meats since at least the Roman era, and possibly as far back as prehistoric times. (It is a salt found in caves, although latterly manufactured, especially when needed to make explosives!) While its early use was driven purely by what was seen to work and with no science to support it, one can hardly compare this with some of our other ancient practices which thankfully did not make it into modern usage:

[Deadly nightshade is seen to make an excellent eye-drop if you wish to

a) appear in love

and

b) die slowly and horribly!]

As so often happens, the greedy sought greater convenience and profit for themselves. Saltpetre and its derivatives became abused in amounts that might affect the greater population's health (In much the same way as farming has overused it on the land in the past, too) Laws were therefore passed to prevent this, once scientific knowledge caught up with the practice. Now though, the political impetus to completely ban the use of saltpetre or more potent cousin ?Sodium Nitrite? in organic bacon production, threatens not only the artisan but the consumer too. Authorities are so poorly educated in these increasingly specialist (and if we're not careful, extinct) areas of

craftsmanship that to make useful judgements on behalf of a public; to inform the public even, is impossible. Unfortunately it seems that knowledge is not power. Certainly we are seeing once again that one can exert power without knowledge. In answer to this increasingly obvious deficit, and in self defence, wider industry has made inroads to understanding the curing process over the last 2 years: Hardly complete, but groundbreaking nevertheless. Especially considering how unbelievably complex it is in biochemical terms. Some might even say magical. It was indeed the alchemists (who included people such as Newton among their number) who first identified nitrates (saltpetre being such a thing) as the 'source of life itself'.

A statement too far in-fact, but in modern science confirms the vast importance of these compounds in biochemistry.

Shame then, that until yesterday's Stakeholder meeting, nobody wanted to know.

Is it too late? Will a knee-jerk political reaction consign millennia of dedicated artisans to the history book? At the moment, just about, a bacon butty doesn't have to be organic to be good. But the point is that if the proposed changes to EU law are passed, it will be impossible to be both organic, and good. That can't be right. Organics have always claimed to be more about ethics than quality, which is a shame. But in the 21st century some joined-up thinking might now be the order of the day. The objective; to understand our ecosystem such that quality and ethics meet each other and go skipping hand-in-hand onto the consumer's plate. In modern terms then, this represents a chance to declare once and for all where the organic movement hopes to go. Something that is truly relevant and accessible to the non-flag-waving majority might be a good start: The fruits of organic labour need to be a thing that non-subscribers can, nevertheless, both enjoy and afford.

This being said, such an aspiration would require a day-to-day understanding of food production and economics which are currently lacking in our population. Given the recent demise of close community and the nuclear family, our experiences come primarily through supermarkets and media. It seems strange to me that food knowledge is of any less importance than say reading and writing. After all, we put it inside our bodies! At base level, eating differs in no way from administering a complex package of drugs. It can also be hugely pleasurable, and helps quite a lot with not being dead, too.

So let me address one small part of that problem and ensure that you, dear reader, have been

informed.

Saltpetre, and the "nitrites" into which they can be transformed quite naturally, are vital for pork to become bacon or ham, organic or otherwise. The quantities in bacon are vastly smaller than the amounts found naturally in green leafy vegetables. What concerns there might be for health can be very easily prevented by use of herbs and spices, or vitamin C which protects the consumer from any potential harm (which is itself a contentious issue) There are no alternative technologies to replace the last few millennia of nitrate use, and there never will be. Agreed, there are many, many reasons to resent the shrinking piece of something-or-other that you bought (2 for the price of one, no doubt!) and the scummy water you find in the pan. But that's simply an issue of supermarket giants and their multinational suppliers making awful bacon, full of water and other undesirables in order to drive down price and increase profit. While none of the above parties might appreciate the role of nitrites other than for a bit of colour and shelf-life, the following statement is no less true:

For the absolutely everyone: artisan, multinational company, or for you and your family, the total banning of nitrites in curing would mean-

No.

More.

Bacon.

Bacon Wizard left that meeting in London yesterday confident that this was now understood by the DEFRA representative, confident in the UK's international position and in the force of its argument. Other member states are perhaps used to thinking of Britain as a culinary midget. But in a moment when the rest of the EU are filled with apathy, they could be in for a very big shock indeed.

After all, we do make BLOODY good bacon! And you can't ignore that.

www.baconwizard.co.uk

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