

Strengthening Food Safety for the 2008 Olympic Games

As the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games draw closer, food safety is once again on the agenda. In fact, the Beijing Olympic Games Organising Committee has been keeping a close eye on the food safety for the Games ever since China won the bid. As a host city, Beijing will cater to over 10,000 athletes and more than half a million international visitors from August to September next year. The Olympic Games will wrap up in mid-August, and the Paralympics will begin the following month.

In recent months, international alarm bells have sounded over the risks posed by Chinese food in the wake of several scandals involving major consumers, such as those in the United States (US). Reports on pet food, toothpaste and farmed fish tainted with potentially dangerous chemicals from China aroused concern over the way in which food is produced, regulated and monitored in China, especially with the Olympic Games on the way.

Against this background, how does Beijing deal with food safety problems? What has it done to safeguard food safety during the Olympic Games and what are the standards like now? To answer these questions, I contacted the Olympic Games Organising Committee, and conducted some telephone and e-mail interviews with two relevant people on 9 November 2007.

According to the Beijing Health Bureau, during the Olympic Games, the estimated food consumption levels at the Olympic Village are: 75,000 litres of milk; 750 litres of tomato sauce; 330 tonnes of vegetables and fruit; 131 tonnes of meat; 82 tonnes of seafood; 21 tonnes of cheese; and three million bottles of drinks. These are clearly very large figures. To ensure the safety and security of their supply, they must address food safety issues from the beginning of the food production process.

For Guo Changjun, surprise visits from food safety inspectors became part of life long ago. Guo, who manages an organic farm in Beijing, near the Badaling section of the Great Wall, says pressure to increase 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 their product won't sell

well if they do so,' explained Guo. His 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 few years,' he told me.

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

'According to the experts, 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 related. The expert Guo was referring to is Professor Cai Tongyi, a consultant for the Beijing Olympic Food Safety Consulting Committee, which was established in 2005 with fifteen experts, about half of them drawn from international organisations. In addition, Cai is a consultant of China's National Food and Nutrition Consulting Committee, Vice-Chairperson of China's Green Food Association, standing Director of the China Institute of Food Science and Technology, Director of the Beijing Society of Food Science, and a member of the Chinese Science Committee in the Danone Nutrition Center of France. Due to the fact that Guo's farm relates closely to Cai, they get along well with each other and Guo highly respects Cai.

Under the food tracing system, firstly, suppliers put tracking information labels on the products. Secondly, the transportation process is monitored by a global positioning system (GPS). The temperature and humidity at which the food is stored is also supervised. Thirdly, after a final quality check, food is sent to the kitchen at the Olympic Village. Lastly, if any food poisoning occurs, the tracing system can take effect within minutes, tracking the source and removing the tainted food. Guo's organic farm is already a part of the ambitious new system, and has added traceable bar codes to all of its products that contain information such 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 felt under pressure.

As it is the first time the Games will be hosted by Beijing, the organisers are paying attention to every small detail. ‘The Games organisers 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 in conclusion, full of confidence. Now that the Beijing organisers can ensure food safety from production to supply, how can they ensure food safety during the course of preparation? Chef Zhang Jingan shares his views and experiences.

Recently, the Beijing Health Bureau inspected 21,000 out of 35,000 restaurants in the city and graded them on food safety. 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 Games.

The Grand Hotel is among the restaurants in the capital tasked with upgrading their working conditions to meet international standards ahead of the Beijing Games. As the chef that has prepared Chinese food at the hotel for seventeen years in the food and beverage department, Zhang Jingan now has to complete even more work in administration for the purpose of ensuring stricter safety controls. He was ordered to keep meticulous records of his operations recently. ‘At first we weren’t used to doing so much paperwork every day. 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 that not only meets international health standards, but also covers a range of local cuisines with Chinese characteristics.

According to Zhang, 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 (CCPs) 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 food. After introducing the HACCP system, every kitchen at our hotel has at least two big notebooks recording our daily operations,' Zhang continued, with a note of helplessness in his voice. According to Zhang, there is a quality control in the basement of the hotel testing samples of the food and dishware every day. 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 15 June 2007, Zhang's department still gets surprise spot checks by the verification organisation. '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 Games. This is what we should do and it is our pleasure to host such world-class games,' Zhang smiled.

(Thanks to Beijing Health Bureau for its contribution to this report.)