

The Washington Post

Au revoir, Mimolette? Fans unhappy as FDA blocks French cheese shipments over mites.

By Brady Dennis – June 28th, 2013

It's the Great Cheese Mite Mystery.

For centuries, microscopic mites have been part of the process for making Mimolette, a mild-tasting cheese shaped like a cannonball and electric orange in color. For decades, the cheese has been imported from France and distributed to shops and grocery stores across the United States.

That is, until this spring, when the Food and Drug Administration began blocking shipments of the Gouda-like product at U.S. ports, leaving thousands of pounds of it stranded in warehouses from New Jersey to California.

The FDA says inspectors found too many cheese mites per square inch crawling on the canteloupe-like rinds of Mimolette, raising health concerns. But the agency hasn't explained exactly why it began holding up the cheese shipments after decades of relatively few problems. "The only thing we can do is cite our regulations, which show very clearly that our job is to protect the food supply," FDA spokeswoman Patricia El-Hinnawy said.

The move has provoked outrage among the small-but-fervent band of Mimolette fans, who call the blockage unwarranted and are fretting about what it means for the fate of other cheeses that rely on mites as part of the aging process.

"It's completely natural. You have bugs on every single cheese you leave in the open air," said Benoit de Vitton, North American representative for Isigny Sainte-Mere, a top exporter of Mimolette based in Normandy. "You can't have Mimolette without cheese mites. It wouldn't be Mimolette."

The protests, which have occurred on both sides of the Atlantic, include a recent Facebook campaign by Jill Erber, who with her husband runs two Cheesetique shops in Northern Virginia.

"Alert! In case you're unaware, the FDA has cut off supplies of Mimolette, a beloved French hard-aged cheese, as it feels that the microscopic mites on the rind (essential for creating the cheese's unique flavor) might cause an allergic reaction," Erber wrote on Cheesetique's Facebook page this month.

"In protest — and in honor of Mimolette, which has been made the same way since King Louis XIV declared it the National Cheese of France, Cheesetique is giving away Mimolette for free. . . . All you have to do is post a photo of yourself frowning pathetically on our Facebook page."

She added, “Mimolette is running out all over the country . . . so this give-away is just while supplies last.”

Scores of gloomy-faced photos began rolling in, from as close as Arlington and Rockville and as far as San Francisco and Switzerland. A man and his parrot stared sullenly at the camera. A little girl pouted. A bride holding a bouquet looked indignant. A Cleveland woman wiped tears from her eyes.

“Drat those FDA bureaucrats — they obviously have never tasted the subtle magnificence of this cheese,” one Mimolette devotee wrote beside her picture.

“Mites are people, too,” wrote another.

“Sacre Bleu!” wrote another.

The cheese-mite tempest began in March, when the FDA stopped a shipment of Mimolette from Isigny, citing the product as “filthy,” “putrid” and unfit for consumption.

Subsequent shipments also got held up, de Vitton said, and the company soon halted shipments to the United States. The roughly 3,300 of pounds of Mimolette detained in America cannot be distributed until the FDA gives approval, de Vitton said, adding that it’s impractical to send the cheese back to France, and it will probably have to be destroyed.

“It’s a big hit for the company,” he said. “Obviously, I think it’s unfair. . . . I absolutely want to sell it again [in the United States], but the last thing you want is to be fighting with the FDA.”

De Vitton said mites accumulate on the outside of Mimolette during the months it is stored in caves to age. Before shipping, workers brush off the rinds and spray them with compressed air to get rid of most of the mites.

“But if you have just one or two mites on the rind, they will reproduce during transportation,” de Vitton said, adding, “No one eats the rind.”

FDA records show that other shipments of Mimolette from companies other than Isigny have been detained recently. Agency officials say there is no official “ban,” nor have they issued import alerts that would prevent shipments from coming into the country, as long as they meet current safety standards.

The agency said it has “no established levels” for the maximum number of mites allowed on cheese and that inspectors evaluate import samples on a case-by-case basis. “We do have a target value of 6 mites per square inch that represents a level of concern for field laboratories,” El-Hinnawy said in a statement.

Rachel Dutton, a microbiologist who runs a cheese research lab at Harvard University, said people who handle cheese and come into contact with large amounts of mites have been known to have occasional allergic reactions. But she said she’s unaware of anyone getting sick from eating mites in cheese, which itself is full of various microbes that provide distinct textures, flavors and aromas.

“I understand their desire to protect the consumer,” Dutton said of the FDA’s caution. But “it’s true that these cheeses have been consumed for hundreds, if not thousands, of years with no apparent link to disease from the mites.”

Whatever the reasons, the FDA’s crackdown has struck a nerve.

In New York, dozens of protesters, many dressed in orange, took to the streets in Greenwich Village in April to hand out samples of Mimolette to draw attention to the dispute.

In Washington, the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, produced a video interview with Erber and pondered in a blog post: “Could this be the most useless allocation of FDA resources yet? It just mite.”

The Washington Times published an editorial with the headline “Free the cheese mites,” which likened FDA officials to “nannies” who “just groove on bossing people around.”

Cathy Strange, the global cheese buyer for Whole Foods Market, said the grocery chain has been buying as much remaining Mimolette from suppliers as it can.

“It just makes us a bit sad,” said Strange, who remains hopeful that the imports can continue. “It’s one of those unique cheeses that not too many people know about, but if you’re in the cheese community, you know. . . . It’s one of my favorite. It would be in my top 10.”

But there’s also an air of resignation in the cheese world that Mimolette’s moment might have passed on this side of the Atlantic.

Erber has a decent stock in her stores in Alexandria and Shirlington that sells at \$19.99 per pound, but she’s not holding her breath that she’ll find more when it runs out.

“Adieu, Mimolette,” she wrote in a newsletter to her customers this month. “It’s been nice knowing you.”

De Vitton said his company has been working with the FDA in hopes of finding a way to get Mimolette back on the U.S. market. But even he has his doubts.

“I think it’s gone. There’s no way we can produce the Mimolette without mites, and the FDA doesn’t want mites,” de Vitton said. “As we say in French, c’est la vie.”