



“I’m in What?!”

A few things that are
not as vegetarian as
you might think

Not so Vegetarian

Processed fast food is very popular in the world today, and even devotees often take bread, chips and other items. You may be aware that many of those products are not healthy, but what some people don't know is that many of them are also not vegetarian.

Even if you read the label, it can be misleading. For example, “natural flavors” can often refer to non-veg items. Such ingredients are very common in processed food today. An article last year on CNN reported:

“In the Environmental Working Group’s Food Scores database of over 80,000 foods, “natural flavor” is the fourth most common ingredient listed on labels. The only ingredients that outrank it: salt, water and sugar.”

“Natural flavors” can have anywhere from 50 to 100 different ingredients in them. Here are a few natural flavors and other innocuous sounding items that are definitely, or possibly not vegetarian:

Vanilla or Raspberry flavors:

These are often made from castoreum, a bitter, orange-brown, odoriferous, oily secretion that is found in two sacs between the anus and the external genitals of beavers. Again, the only identification for castoreum may be the words, “Natural flavors” on the label. (So much for many of the so-called, “vegetarian” ice-creams. Hare Krishna.)

Red Colored Candies:

Any candy (or anything else) that is colored with natural red dye #4, (including some ice cream, yogurt and fruit punch) contains carmine. Carmine is made of beetles (yes, the insect) that are crushed up and then boiled in ammonia or sodium carbonate to produce a red dye. Aside from being called, a natural flavor, on labels carmine is sometimes called: Natural Red 4, Crimson Lake, Cochineal, C.I. 75470, and E120.

Confectioner’s Glaze or Shellac:

This gives a shiny coating to jellybeans, candy corn, chocolates and some vitamins. It may sound okay, but it’s made from the female lac bug, an insect found on trees in India and Thailand.

Gelatin:

Gelatin is made from the skin, bones, and connective tissues of animals (generally cows and pigs). It is found in Jello, marshmallows, gummy candy, and many yogurts. Sometimes it is slipped into the ingredient list as, a natural flavor or as “hydrolyzed collagen protein.”

Beer and Wine:

I hope that devotees are not taking any alcoholic beverages, but you may want to inform any of your non-devotee vegetarian friends that most beer brands (especially it seems, the British ones), as well as some wine manufacturers add an innocuous sounding item called, “isinglas”, to their product. Isinglas is composed of ground up fish bladders. They add this to take out the cloudy appearance in beer and wine.

Potato Chips:

These are very popular with some devotees, especially in the West. Even if you are careful to avoid the flavors that are obviously non-veg, some brands and flavors of chips contain chicken fat and pork enzymes. Most chips are fried in vegetable oil, but there are some that are fried in beef or chicken fat. They may also use animal fat or flavorings to add a smoky, meaty flavor to the chips. Again, on the label such non-veg additives are often only identified as, “natural flavors”.

White Sugar:

Most people know have heard that white sugar is extremely bad for health. But many may not know that white sugar has recently been shown to be 8 times more addictive than cocaine! (Interestingly, white flour, and white rice have also been found to be addictive, although not as much so as white sugar. White sugar, white flour, and white rice are all related to insulin resistance, obesity and heart disease). Aside from that, most sugar is also non-vegetarian. It is made from processed cow bones, which are used to produce the white color. Although popular with devotees (and yes, I know Srila Prabhupada said we could cook with them), neither white sugar, nor white flour, nor white rice were used at the time of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. They are all modern inventions.

Ghee:

Carvaka Muni has recommended that one should beg, borrow or steal money to purchase ghee — *kṛtvā ghr̥taṁ pibet*. However, what many persons sadly don't know today is that most of the brands of ghee available on the market in India are mixed with animal fats. We heard about one company a few years ago in Vrindavan that was offering what they proclaimed to be, "pure ghee". It had a very nice yellow color and was packaged with a picture of Krishna. Many of the major temples in Vrindavan were purchasing the product and using it to cook for the deities. Finally, one ISKCON devotee sent a sample to a lab in South India. They charged him RS 10,000 and sent back their findings, which were something like: 65% cow ghee, and 35% chicken fat!

It is any wonder then that Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur Prabhupada flatly forbade the devotees in his math from purchasing store bought ghee or sugar, both of which he said were not vegetarian and not fit to be offered to the deity. (We can note that these items are certainly not purer today than they were at that time, 100 years ago.)

[Regarding ghee and other milk products, I'm not going to get into speaking about the horrendous way that commercial dairies treat cows and calves. That is a connected, but separate and lengthy topic. I'll simply say that after learning of the practices and behavior of these factory dairies, many devotees today, and many leading devotees, refuse to offer such milk to the deities or take it themselves unless it is from protected cows. Whichever side you may be on that fiery debate; no one can argue that it is a much higher standard of deity worship to only offer milk from protected cows.]

Bread:

This is also an item often taken by some devotees, who sometimes find it a time saving device. Aside from the questionable nature of eating grains imbued with the consciousness of non-devotees, even if the product claims to be vegetarian, many are not.

If they contain the ingredient, L-Cysteine, don't purchase it. L-Cysteine is made from one of the following items: Human hair that is purchased from barber shops and saloons in China, India and other places (yuck!); Duckfeathers (poor ducks!); or pig bristles.

Packaged Orange Juice:

Usually people think that orange juice is very healthy, but what most don't know is that it often contains added omega-3s, which are often extracted from fish, such as anchovies, tilapia, and sardines.

Here is a link to a video that describes some of the above:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=THX-EAcXO650>

Closing Thoughts:

Mahaprabhu's associate Srila Raghava Pandit is famous for rejecting some coconuts because the bearer carrying the coconuts touched the upper part of a door frame and then the coconut that was to be offered to Raghava's deities (see *Cc. madhya* 15.69-87). It's my firm opinion that if Raghava Pandit were present today he would not accept any of the items mentioned in this article as fit to be offered to the Lord.

Yes, sometimes devotees are preaching in difficult circumstances in which it's very hard or impossible to find pure items. In such cases, Srila Prabhupada famously allowed them to offer and use commercial milk that contained Vitamin D12 in it (which, at least in those days was made from fish oil). Srila Prabhupada said something like, "If there is nothing else that can be found then what to do."

Preaching is of the essence and we should do whatever is necessary to spread Mahaprabhu's movement. However, that should obviously be within reason. Srila Prabhupada and our acaryas sometimes made allowances in special circumstances. However, we can also bear in mind that Bhaktivinoda Thakur once stated, "The symptom of an *apa-sampradaya* (or a group deviating from our Krishna consciousness tradition) is that they take an extraordinary time, place, and circumstance instruction from an empowered acarya, and make it a general standard (Sajjana-toshani magazine, I heard quoted from Srila Gour Govinda Maharaja). If pure vegetarian sugar or ghee is available (or can be made), then to not use it, in preference to something cheaper is simply offensive.

I pray that these thoughts may be somehow useful for the followers of Sri Sachinandana Gaura Hari.

— *Vaiṣṇava-kṛpā-prārthī*,

Madhavananda Das (Jagannath Puri Dham, 30 October 2016)