

## POINT OF VIEW

## Was it really bath tissue in Russian bologna sausage?

Journalist Sarah Nassauer's recent Wall Street Journal article **What is often in shredded cheese besides cheese?** provided yet another closer look at the common and popular food additive: cellulose.

### Greg Grishchenko

She and her interviewed sources did a thorough job of describing various food products where cellulose used to enhance quality, protect taste, replace fat or bring a creamier feel. This important component of everyday life made from wood pulp or other plant fibers plays many roles in the packaged food field and in prescription drugs as well. Nutrition experts say the insoluble fiber in cellulose coming from wood pulp is no different from that found in vegetables and offers the same health benefits. A significant portion of cellulose comes in powdered form, made by cooking raw plant fiber - mostly wood - in specific chemicals to isolate the cellulose. After purification and further processing, the fiber is ready to enter a food chain.

FURTHER TO POWDERED CELLULOSE, ANOTHER FIBER ADDITIVE - MCC OR MICROCRYSTALLINE CELLULOSE - also represents refined wood pulp and is used as a texturizer, anti-caking agent, fat substitute, emulsifier, extender, and bulking agent in foods and is widely used in vitamin pills. MCC is considered safe for human consumption and is present in the FDA approved list of food supplement components. The FDA, the US government agency regulating most food industry products, sets no limit on the amount of cellulose that can be used in food products meant for human consumption. The USDA, which regulates meats, has set a limit of 3.5% on the use of cellulose, since fiber in processed meat products cannot be recognized nutritionally. So when we pick up a package of sliced bologna lunchmeat in the supermarket, we never think about other wood pulp products located in the nearby household goods aisle.

NEWSPAPER AND TV REPORTS ABOUT CELLULOSE IN FOOD BROUGHT ME BACK ALMOST 40 YEARS AGO to my youth years in Ukraine, then part of the Soviet Union. In the late 1960s the Syassky mill on the outskirts of St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) began production of toilet rolls, made of crude tissue paper and labeled on the roll band according to the length of tissue in the roll stated in meters (54 or 65, the most popular sizes).

PREVIOUSLY, TOILET PAPER IN THE SOVIET UNION WAS CONSIDERED A LUXURY ITEM and was never sold in retail outlets. It was imported in small quantities from the West for distribution mostly in hotels frequented by foreign visitors and by the Communist party elite. When toilet rolls first appeared on sale in 1968 it was a marketing fiasco. People, who were in the habit of using any available alternative paper means like newspapers, simply did not pay attention to a new staple that should be added to weekly expenses.

It took a short period of time, however, for the public to appreciate the convenience of bath tissue, and toilet rolls quickly joined the list of "deficit" products that were flying out from store shelves within hours after they were displayed.

AT THE SAME TIME SOVIET AGRICULTURAL OUTPUT WAS SHOWING SIGNS OF A SLOWDOWN, especially in the supply of meat - source of the beloved bologna sausage. This type of sausage was a very popular and inexpensive food for the majority of the population. By 1970, Soviet consumers of bologna began to perceive a change in the taste and appearance of the sausage.

With media strictly controlled by the government, an alternative news source began to rapidly spread rumors, which promptly connected the change in the taste of bologna, occasional findings of bits of kraft paper in sausage and the fast-diminishing supply of bath tissue, all in one phrase: "The government puts toilet paper in bologna in order to use less meat in it".

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THERE WAS NEVER ANY OFFICIAL DENIAL OR EXPLANATION, and this story dragged on for another fifteen years until the Perestroika made communication more open. Then, numerous publications began to appear attempting to exonerate bologna products, explaining that the change in taste was due to the replacement of fresh meat with frozen stock. The media also vindicated occasional findings of bits of paper in bologna sausage. They appeared to be remains of frozen meat wrap, missed by negligent operators. Even the GOST (Soviet Government Standard) for bologna was published in the news media stating that no cellulose was present in meat products. It is hard to confirm if the ever-suspicious Soviet public was able to dispel its worries in eating bologna.

VERY FEW PEOPLE IN TODAY'S RUSSIA REMEMBER THE "TOILET PAPER IN BOLOGNA" STORY. However, the new free market economy caused a deterioration of the government control system regulating the food industry. The new generation of Russians born after the Soviet empire collapsed does not remember the taste of "old" bologna and is hardly aware of the microcrystalline cellulose percentage in today's sausage supply. •