

07/11/2003 Entry: "Making the All-American Picnic All American is Harder Than You Think"

So you want to have the classic All-American Picnic or Bar-B-Que on July 4th to celebrate America's independence? Your grocery list probably includes hot dogs and apple pie, and maybe some cool ice cream for a hot, sunny day.

Few Americans are aware that it's getting much more difficult to buy an American brand of ice cream anymore. Foreign companies, owners and investors will probably do as much celebrating as we do on July 4th knowing we celebrate Independence Day without realizing how inter-dependent we are on them to satisfy our sweet tooth.

If we can't supply the wants and desires of the American market, we have ceased to be an independent nation.

Most of the popular brands sold in America aren't even American-owned. Ben & Jerry's sold out to Unilever NV in 2000. Unilever is a joint venture between England and The Netherlands. Haagen-Dazs, Drumsticks and Push Ups are owned by Swiss-owned Nestle. Now Nestle wants to buy Oakland, CA-based Dreyer's brand ice cream, which includes Edy's, Dreamery and Godiva. The Federal Trade Commission, who originally came out opposing the deal, has now done an about face, so Nestle and Unilever will control 98% of super-premium ice cream sales. To close the deal, Nestle is to sell off some of their brands to Coolbrands, a Canadian company, which owns the Eskimo Pie brand, among others.

Where does this leave America? Without much of an ice cream industry. You'll have to buy Schwan's, Sealtest or Healthy Choice to buy an American brand.

Swiss-owned Nestle is already the biggest food company in the world, and they haven't limited themselves to people food either. They bought St. Louis-based Purina last year, and tried unsuccessfully to buy American candy favorite Hershey. One way Nestle tried to calm the fears of those who strongly opposed the sale of Hershey to a foreign conglomerate was to virtually guarantee no Pennsylvania factories would be closed if the deal went through. Nestle tried to sell the idea that it would be a simple change of ownership.

The deal fell through anyway, since patriotic Pennsylvanian's feared a negative impact on their communities - especially the town of Hershey - and the loss of an American tradition. For Heaven's sakes, how could the town of Hershey, whose street lamps are in the shape of Hershey's kisses, let their company be controlled by distant owners and investors across the Atlantic? How much bigger can the world's largest food company get?

But what happened after Nestle backed-off from buying Hershey's, where we were told not one American factory would be closed? Last month, Nestle closed their own factory in Fulton, NY, which makes its Nestle Crunch bars. Maybe if we stopped buying Nestle Crunch bars and bought Hershey bars instead, those laid off American workers could find employment in a Hershey factory.

The perfect way to top off your ice cream is also the perfect way to top off your support for what I regard as a truly All-American, modern-day hero company. Hershey's also makes chocolate syrup, so if all you can find is foreign ice cream, at least it will be covered with American chocolate syrup.

The good news is that you can keep the rest of your picnic all American if you are careful. It's hard not to buy an American brand hot dog, but you'll have to be careful what condiments you put on your Oscar Meyer. French's mustard isn't French, but it isn't American either. It's British. And although Grey Poupon sounds like it might be foreign, it's actually American owned (and American made). Both Heinz and Hunts are American owned too, so you can feel good about laying on the ketchup. Most hot dog and hamburger buns are American as well, and some like Merita and Wonder are union made too.

After the picnic is over and you've had plenty to eat, as the day cools down, you might be tempted to relax and enjoy some good old-fashioned Carnation hot chocolate. After avoiding all those Swiss brands all day, you wouldn't dare get caught with Swiss Miss hot chocolate. Or would you? Nice try, but Swiss Miss is American owned, and Carnation is owned by the Swiss (Nestle).

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