Pizza Hut—the nation’s largest pizza chain—deceives customers with false menu claims that “Mozzarella” cheese is on top of certain pizzas.

by Paris Reidhead

Visiting a Pizza Hut provides the patron with a little more class than the average “semi-fast” food restaurant. But any high-class aura evaporates quickly, when investigating Pizza Hut’s claims that “Mozzarella” cheese is used atop certain pizzas.

• Pizza Hut uses “Pizza Cheese,” not Mozzarella. “Pizza Cheese” is an inferior, non-standard cheese product. Pizza Hut’s “Pizza Cheese” contains Mozzarella as an ingredient. But a spokesperson for Leprino Foods—the near exclusive supplier of Pizza Hut’s “Pizza Cheese” admits that “Pizza Cheese” isn’t Mozzarella.

• The sodium content of Pizza Hut’s pizza slices is shockingly high—exacerbated by large quantities of salt in “Pizza Cheese.”

A good reporter thoroughly researches the subject. So I took my wife out to Sunday dinner at the Pizza Hut in Cooperstown, NY. We shared an assortment of different toppings; each tasted good. Although advertised as “Mozzarella,” the cheese’s consistence was different from that of a nearby “Mom and Pop” pizzeria. At the non-chain eatery the cheese typically stretches out nice and stringy, even as you eat it off part of a slice. Pizza Hut’s corporate office is located in Dalas. There are a total of 6,324 Pizza Hut restaurants.

Leprino Foods: Near exclusive supplier

Almost all Pizza Hut “Pizza Cheese” is supplied by Leprino Foods. Leprino is headquartered in Denver, Colorado.

“Pizza Cheese” is a non-standard variety, Italian-style amalgam. “Pizza Cheese” is supposed to look and taste like Mozzarella cheese, but “Pizza Cheese” is not a standard variety recognized under rules of the federal Food and Drug Administration. “Pizza Cheese” is an inferior second cousin of Mozzarella. “Pizza Cheese” may contain a variety of items that would not be legal in standardized Mozzarella. Such ingredients included in “Pizza Cheese” processed and sold by Leprino Foods would include:

* Excess moisture (water)
* Excess salt
* Alternate dairy proteins (such as casein and milk protein concentrate)
* Fillers like vegetable starch.

(Editors’ note: Ingredients like salt, dried dairy proteins, and starches conveniently serve to bind up more moisture. Adding water to processed food products is an age-old trick used by manufacturers to boost their profits.)

Leprino Foods “Pizza Cheese” sold to Pizza Hut contains so much water that the product can only be kept in thawed conditions for one week, before it must be thrown out.

On May 11, 1999, Leprino received patent #5,902,625 from the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. The patent’s subheading stated, “Process of Making Mozzarella Cheese and Fermented Milk Foods, recommends that salt in Mozzerella recipe to tie up the surplus moisture. Leprino’s patent permits food starch to come from any of the following plant species: potato, pea, tapioca, corn, wheat, and rice.

The acceptable patented range for food starch included in this “Pizza Cheese” is 0.5-10.0%! Pizza Hut ignores the fact that at the Federal level, 21 CFR 133.155 does not list modified food starch as an approved ingredient for Mozzarella! Nor does CFR (Code of Federal Regulations) define “Pizza Cheese” at all.

But it keeps getting better. The patent allows a range of 0.1-10.0% for dairy solids as part of “Pizza Cheese.” These include casein and milk protein concentrates (MPCs). No casein or MPCs are legal in Mozzarella.

Non-dairy protein isolates were also approved to be included in a range of 0.1-10.0%. Such may include soy protein, gelatin, wheat germ, corn germ, and egg solids.


When I asked my contact if the “Pizza Cheese” was in fact Mozzarella, she said it was. And then I asked, “Has modified food starch in it?” She said yes.

By phone I talked to Laura Majors, a marketing representative at Leprino Foods’ corporate office in Denver.

I asked if “Pizza Cheese” was Mozzarella. She said it was mostly Mozarella, and there were other ingredients added to it.

In conclusion, we must agree with the Leprino spokeswoman: Pizza Hut’s “Pizza Cheese” is NOT Mozzarella.

Continued on next page
by John Bunting

“The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is proposing to amend the labeling to provide for the use of fluid ultrafiltered -milk (UF) in the manufacture of standardized cheeses and related cheese products,” reads an October 19 Federal Register notice. FDA is acting on a petition (Docket No. 2000P-0002) filed by International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA), along with the National Cheese Institute, Grocery Manufacturers of America and National Food Processor Association. The petitioners and their members stand to gain financially with the approval by further reducing the quality of cheese.

For the period 1998-2004 these three organizations spent $17,628,446 lobbying Washington, D.C. FDA has winked, blinked and looked the other way around for a while know that milk quality has improved 100-fold in the past 20 years. So he feels the blame lies elsewhere. He thinks the number one culprit is high-speed-cheese-making operations with no time to make adjustments. No high-speed operation can function without fortification, and that mostly means ultrafiltered milk or MPCs.

The number two quality problem, according to Ascherbrock, is “So-called secondary starters. One has to wonder what flavors some of these starters are contributing to our Cheddar and Colby. Some of these ‘cocktails’ are made up of a number of ‘special ingredients.’” He is, of course, speaking of MPCs.

Third on the list is “…(with) new inventions of how to produce low cost processed cheeses the industry is now stuck with that may not be of the best quality.”

Ascherbrock says, “In Wisconsin we have been lucky to have grading standards which have helped many and for others have been a burden. Those standards from a Pizza Hut menu), I took the liberty to assume that the extra sauce amount was half the normal sauce, which would then be 8 grams, containing (by simple calculation) 40 mg sodium (Na). So one, average 104-gram slice of Pizza Hut “Cheese Only Pizza” would consist of approximately 22 grams of “Pizza Cheese,” 8 grams of sauce, and 74 grams of crust.

I made this assumption about the “normal” amount of sauce, because no one at Pizza Hut customer relations would take the time to return a phone call, would define that term for me. Nor would anyone answer my question regarding the salt level in their “Pizza Cheese.”

On that hypothetical slice, the “Pizza Cheese” and sauce yield 160 mg and 40 mg of Na, respectively; the crust contains no salt, and no other listed Na sources. This yields a total of 200 mg sodium, compared to a sodium value of 500 mg stated in the Pizza Hut nutritional data. It appears that the salty whole is more than the sum of its parts.

So I’d like to know where the extra 300 mg of sodium comes from. One must also ask the question, due to the questionable make-up of “Pizza Cheese”: just how much Mozzarella is 50% more?

I then asked Leprino spokeswoman, Ms. Ma- jors if, with the possibility that “Pizza Cheese” is being supplied to Pizza Hut, could she tell me the salt level in this Leprino product. She asked me to try to get this information from Pizza Hut. I said I had already tried, unsuccessfully. She then told me and said that she could not give me the “Pizza Cheese” salt levels because such was proprietary information.

Medical Experts Very Concerned

What makes this plot thicker, along with the Pizza Hut customer’s circulatory system, is hard-core health data from groups like the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) and the American Heart Association (AHA).

The exact mechanism whereby excess sodium elevates blood pressure is not perfectly understood, even by medical experts. But these think tanks firmly agree that lowering excess sodium reduces hypertension (high blood pressure) and the risk of cardiovascular health threats.

In fact, according to the Cheese Reporter, on November 11, 2005 the CSPI declared war on salt by petitioning the FDA to lower the adult sodium daily value from 2400 mg to 1500 mg. The 2400 mg figure is the basis for the daily value percentages stated in the accompanying chart. Salt (sodium chloride, or NaCl) is about 40% sodium, and there are other forms of sodium in prepared foods.

Facts provided by the AHA show the average American consumes over 4000 mg of sodium per day, helping assure the role of heart disease as the nation’s No. 1 killer. The hope of medical authorities is that if the official sodium daily value is lowered from 2400 mg to 1500mg, the average American’s daily sodium intake might end up at 2000 mg. With current Na daily values (DV) at 2400 mg., five slices of a “Cheese Only” pizza will max out this quota.

Meanwhile, I propose that Pizza Hut make pizza with the existing crust, existing sauce, and pure Mozza- zarella. If they were to do this, my calculations show that a 12” slice of “Cheese Only Pizza” would consist of 22 grams of Mozzarella, 8 grams of sauce, 74 grams of crust. It would contain the 172 mg of Na from salt that it’s supposed to. It would cost Pizza Hut more to make it, but anyone yearning for a healthier, tastier, product would pay the difference, including me.

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December 2005 -- 7