

The lamb curries that contain no lamb: How restaurants are tricking customers into paying for cheap meat

By Eleanor Harding

Curry houses are tricking customers into paying for lamb dishes that actually contain much cheaper cuts of meat. Restaurant owners are more than doubling profits by substituting lamb for chicken, beef and pork – in up to eight out of ten curries in some areas.

Food dye and spices are used to disguise the cheaper meat, with many customers unable to tell they are getting less than half what they paid for – lamb wholesales at £13 per kilogram while beef costs only £5.

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Experts warned the scandal, which has been compared to the row over horse meat, could be putting customers at risk.

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In some regions, up to half the 'lamb' dishes tested contained no lamb at all. The findings are likely to anger those who abstain from eating certain meats for religious reasons.

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Officers were also shocked to find one restaurant passing off ground-up peanuts as almonds, putting those with particular nut allergies at grave risk.

Trading Standards officer Trevor Gray said: 'Our initial findings suggest that the problem is quite widespread. We have got to get the word out to owners that if they are cheating customers they are going to get caught.' The Food Standards Agency has allocated £3.2million this year to helping local authorities collect the food samples. In the regions tested so far, undercover officers bought takeaway curries and sent them off to a lab for analysis. In West Yorkshire, they discovered one in two lamb curries on sale contained no lamb at all – only beef.

And in North Yorkshire eight out of ten dishes were lamb mixed with cheaper meats. In Warwickshire, of the 19 lamb curries bought, 16 used beef or chicken – with four containing no lamb at all. Officers also bought 20 lamb kebabs, all of which were mixed with pork, beef or chicken. Artificial colouring linked to hyperactivity in children was found in 70 per cent of the kebabs, with one containing levels 18 times higher than allowed and another 13 times above the limit.

In Birmingham only half of the lamb dishes sampled were genuine – the rest were mixed with beef and chicken. Nick Lowe, of Trading Standards, said: 'It is quite difficult to tell when it's curry. Some of the dishes are highly coloured... which makes it more difficult to distinguish and the spices will disguise some of the flavour of the meat. 'But we are going through difficult economic times...so the incentive to cut corners is much greater.' Next to be tested is Bradford, the 2011 and 2012 Curry Capital of Britain, which investigators believe could be at the centre of the fraud. MP Anne McIntosh, chair of the Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs Committee, said of the curry con: 'Clearly, the consumer has a right to know not just that the food is fit to eat but it is what it says it is on the label.'

Enam Ali, of the British Curry Awards, said the scandal was giving the industry a bad name, adding: 'Some restaurants are [substituting meat] for financial gain and some are doing it without even knowing.'