

The Codex Alimentarius is an FAO/WHO joint food standard programme that aims to protect the health of consumers.

THE annual meeting of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) was held in Rome during the first week of July at the headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). This 32nd session of CAC was attended by over 463 delegates representing 125 member countries, one member organisation, and 33 international governmental and non-governmental organisations.

As part of the Malaysian delegation to this meeting, I would like to share with you some highlights of the meeting. Developments in CAC sessions are keenly followed by govern-

Keeping the code



ments and the food industry as it is in these sessions that Codex standards are finalised and the progress of other draft standards monitored.

Codex standards have important implications on local food regulations as countries are encouraged to harmonise local legislation with international standards.

First, let's look at the background of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, its objectives, the standard setting procedure, and the food code itself. I will then summarise the highlights of the 32nd CAC session.

FAO/WHO joint effort

Throughout most parts of the world, an increasing number of consumers and governments are becoming aware of food quality and safety issues. More consumers are demanding that their governments take legislative action to ensure that only safe food of acceptable quality is sold and that the risk of foodborne health hazards is minimised.

With this realisation, the 16th World Health Assembly officially approved the establishment of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and World Health Organisation (WHO) Joint Programme on Food Standards – the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC), in 1963. The CAC is an intergovernmental organisation. The Joint Food Standards Programme is aimed at protecting the health of consumers and ensur-

ing fair trade practices in the food trade.

It also aims to promote the coordination of all food standards work undertaken by international governmental and non-governmental organisations.

“Codex alimentarius” is a Latin term, meaning food law or food code. It is therefore a collection of standards, codes of practice, guidelines, and other recommendations that serve to provide guidance to governments for their respective national food control systems. It aims to achieve international harmonisation in food quality and safety requirements.

After almost 50 years, the programme has established more than 200 specific commodity standards for individual foods or groups of foods. The commodities included in the Codex cover all the major items of importance to human nutrition, e.g. cereals, legumes, and their products; fats and oils; fish and fishery products; fresh fruit and vegetable products; meat and meat products; milk and milk products; sugars, cocoa, chocolate, and other miscellaneous products.

In addition, a number of horizontal standards have been published to cover general topics. The Codex general standard for the labelling of prepackaged foods covers the labeling requirements of all prepackaged food products. The Codex standard for food additives and veterinary drugs provides guidance on the chemicals permitted for use in foods and their levels. Standards on contaminants and pesticide residues specify the maximum

amounts that may be permitted to remain in foods. Other general subject standards are in relation to food hygiene, food analysis and sampling.

These standards are generally referred to as Codex Standards and are available from the Codex website.

How the Codex system works

The statutes and rules of procedure of the CAC were established to ensure that the organisation pursues its clearly defined objectives in a disciplined, dispassionate, and scientific manner.

The statutes provide the legal basis for the work of the CAC and formally reflect the concepts behind, and the reasons for, the establishment as well as the terms of reference and objectives. Membership of the commission is open to all member nations and associate members of FAO and WHO.

By June 2009, 99% of the world's population were represented in the Commission through 180 member countries and one member organisation (European Community).

The rules of procedure of the CAC describe and formalise working procedures appropriate to an intergovernmental body. The Codex step procedures for preparing standards are well defined, open, and transparent. It starts from consideration of a proposal to the executive committee in step 1 through to several stages of government comments before finally being adopted by the commission at step 8. Most standards take a number of years to develop.

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1/2 cup (123g)	
Servings Per Container about 3 1/2	
Amount/Serving	
Calories 35	Calories from Fat 0
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 0g	0%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 270mg	11%
Total Carbohydrate 7g	2%
Dietary Fiber 2g	8%
Sugars 5g	
Protein 1g	
Vitamin A 10% • Vitamin C 20%	
Calcium 4% • Iron 8%	
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.	

INGREDIENTS: TOMATOES, TOMATO JUICE, HIGH FRUCTOSE CORN SYRUP, SALT, DEHYDRATED ONION, DEHYDRATED CELERY, DEHYDRATED BELL PEPPER, CALCIUM CHLORIDE, CITRIC

Chicken Protein
 Prep: 10 minutes
 Cook: 22 minutes
 Servings: 4
 1-1/4 lb. skinless, boneless chicken breasts
 2 Tbsp. olive oil
 2 medium mushrooms
 1 cup chopped onion
 1 can (14.5 oz.) tomatoes
 1/2 tsp. dried Italian seasoning
 1 cup (4 oz.) shredded cheddar cheese
 1. Season chicken with salt and pepper. Cook chicken in hot oil for 12 minutes, turning once.
 2. Cook and stir mushrooms, onion, and tomatoes in medium-high heat until undrained tomatoes are heated and simmer.
 3. Return chicken to skillet. Garnish with fresh basil.

© S&W FINE FOODS, INC., SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94103
 QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS CALL 800-252-7000 (MON.-FRI.)
 WWW.SWFINEFOODS.COM
 REFRIGERATE ANY UNUSED PORTION IN A SEPARATE COVERED CONTAINER.
 *NET CARBS PER SERVING

The Codex committee on nutrition and foods for special dietary uses is a general subject committee. Together with the Codex committee on food labelling, another general subject committee, Codex standards on nutrition labeling and nutrition and health claims have been developed.



At the 32nd session of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, three commodity standards forwarded by the Asia coordinating committee were adopted – for ginseng products, gochujang (a savoury, fermented Korean condiment), and fermented soybean paste.

Once adopted by the commission, a Codex standard is added to the Codex Alimentarius.

The Codex standard elaboration process is undertaken by Codex committees. Each committee is hosted by a member country, which is chiefly responsible for the cost of the committee's maintenance and administration and for providing its chairperson.

The commodity committees take care of elaboration of standards for the commodities listed previously. The general subject committees develop general principles or concepts or horizontal standards and guides for all foods. The Codex committee on nutrition and foods for special dietary uses is a general subject committee. Together with the Codex committee on food labelling, another general subject committee, Codex standards on nutrition labeling and nutrition and health claims have been developed.

Codex and the international food trade

It would, of course, be ideal if all countries harmonised their food laws and adopted internationally agreed standards. In this way, there would be fewer barriers to trade and freer movement of food products among countries. However, Codex standards and guidelines only serve as guides to governments, i.e. they are not mandatory for governments to adopt fully into national regulations.

Recognising that measures adopted by national governments to protect the health of their consumers, animals, and plants could become disguised barriers to trade, as well as discriminatory, the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Agreements became part of the agreements of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Both agreements acknowledge the importance of harmonising standards internationally so as to minimise or eliminate the risk of sanitary, phytosanitary, and other technical standards becoming barriers to trade.

Subsequently, Codex standards and guidelines were adopted as scientifically justified norms for the purpose of these agreements. They have become accepted as the benchmark against which national measures and regulations are evaluated and became used as the benchmark in international trade disputes.

As a result of these developments, attendance and participation at Codex meetings, especially by developing countries, has markedly increased. The process of harmonisation has also been gaining impetus by virtue of the strong international desire to facilitate trade and the desire of consumers around the world to have access to safe and nutritious foods.

An increasing number of countries are aligning their national food standards, or parts of them (especially those relating to safety), with those of the Codex Alimentarius. This is particularly so in the case of additives, contaminants, and residues.

The 32nd session of the CAC

At the 32nd Session of the CAC in Rome last month, two items discussed in relation to amendments to the procedural manual are noteworthy. One was the proposed amendments to the guidelines to chairpersons of Codex committees, especially to contribute to ensuring transparency in consensus building. The second issue was in relation to the proposed amendment to the Terms of Reference of the Committee on General Principles.

The CAC adopted many standards at step 8 of the procedure. Three commodity standards forwarded by the Asia Coordinating Committee were adopted, namely draft regional standard for gochujang (a savoury, fermented Korean condiment to flavor stews and marinate meat), ginseng products, and fermented soybean paste.

Three nutrition related standards were adopted. These were: conditions for nutrient content claim for dietary fibre (and the definition of dietary fibre); nutritional risk analysis principles and guidelines for application to the work of the committee on nutrition and foods for the special dietary uses; and recommendations on the scientific basis of health claims.

Several other commodity standards were also adopted, as well as maximum residue limits for pesticides and veterinary drugs, several codes of practice and guidelines, and food additive provisions of the General Standard for Food Additives (GSFA).

Several other standards were adopted at step 5 of the procedure and will continue to be discussed within the respective committees. Two standards pertinent to Malaysia's lead in fats and oils are the proposed criteria to assess the acceptability of substances for inclusion in a list of acceptable previous cargoes for the storage and transport of edible fats and oils in bulk, and draft amendment to the standard for named vegetable oil: inclusion of palm kernel olein and palm kernel stearin. An important document adopted in relation to international trade is the proposed draft revised code of ethics for international trade in foods.

An issue that has been discussed for over a decade and finally resolved in this session of the CAC is the use of the lactoperoxidase system for milk and milk products in international trade. The system is only allowed to be used for trade based on mutual agreement between countries.

One agenda item deliberated at length is in relation to participation of developing countries in Codex work. Several recommendations were made regarding the Codex trust fund, which is intended to increase participation of developing countries in Codex meetings. It was also emphasised that it is also important to improve the capacity of developing countries so as to ensure effective participation.

Malaysia participates actively in Codex activities

Malaysia has participated in Codex activities since the 1960s. Since 1996, the Food Safety and Quality Division of the Ministry of Health has been the Codex secretariat for Malaysia. Over the years, Malaysia has contributed actively to various Codex activities. We have successfully hosted several Codex meetings and working groups.

Malaysia was also the Vice-Chairperson of the CAC for the third term (2005-2008). In 2005, Malaysia successfully bid to host the Codex Committee on Fats and Oils.

In February this year, we successfully

organised the first session of this committee, proving to the CAC that Malaysia is capable of providing not just the resources and facilities, but also a capable technical team, including chairperson for this international meeting.

We have realised over the years that it is important for Malaysia to participate effectively in these meetings to ensure that the interest of the nation is taken care of. Before each Codex committee meeting, a series of discussions are held in the country among relevant government departments, professional bodies, the food industry and consumer organisations to develop national positions.

As in previous years, Malaysia has presented its view points on various agenda items in this session of CAC.

Our positions in the various issues I have highlighted above have helped shape decisions made in the meeting. Malaysia will continue to participate in the Codex standard setting process to ensure such standards and policy decisions gain greater general acceptance globally.

More information on the CAC and a full report of the 32nd Session of the CAC can be obtained from www.codexalimentarius.net/web/index_en.jsp

■ *NutriScene* is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail starhealth@thestar.com.my.

The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice.

Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.