

TRUE OR FALSE

More fakes on the make

Consumers need to be on guard, writes
Wendy Knowler

THERE’S no escaping fakes — fake banknotes, fake degrees, fake designer handbags, fake leather sofas ... if it’s in demand, someone will find a way to fake it. Because they can. The perpetrators all operate on the same fraud formula: Opportunity plus motivation minus effective controls. And, of course, the motivation is always money. Food faking is a particularly unpalatable form of fraud and, at its most morally challenged, it is lethal.

Remember the Chinese baby milk powder scandal of 2008, when dodgy producers dissolved the toxic chemical melamine into milk to fake the required protein levels? Six babies died and almost 300 000 developed kidney problems. Unsurprisingly, the melamine milk scandal cropped up several times at the one-day Food Fraud Workshop hosted by the SA Association for Food Science and Technology in Pretoria last week. Globally, the food fraudsters’ favourites are olive oil; fish; organic foods; milk; grains; honey and maple syrup; coffee and tea; spices; wine and fruit juices. Baby-killing food fraud is as bad as it gets, but the run-of-the-mill food fakery that goes on right under our South African noses is outrageous. Industrial acetic acid being passed off as spirit vinegar; honey mixed with undeclared syrup; and meat suppliers fraudulently classifying inferior meat as Class A for a supermarket order were among the horrors revealed by Niel Erasmus of the Directorate of Food Safety and Quality Assurance, which



POWDER KEG: Six children died and 300 000 developed kidney problems in China as a result of drinking baby formula that was mixed with melamine to push up the required protein levels
Picture: AFP

Shocking discovery of fire hydrant water being crudely piped into Valpré bottles

falls under the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. The directorate has also dealt with people photocopying the label of a famous brand’s can of baked beans for use on their not-so-lekker beans. The discovery of fire hydrant water being crudely piped into Valpré bottles at a Crown Mines warehouse just four months ago also got a mention — 450 000 bottles of the far-from-spring water were awaiting distribution when the police raided. Dr Harris Steinman, director of a Cape Town lab that tests commercial products for allergens, told of testing a bakery’s “gluten-

free” rolls and finding gluten levels consistent with wheat; detecting dried pawpaw seeds snuck into a batch of peppercorns; and chilli spice containing peanuts. For those with a peanut allergy, that could be fatal. “Horsegate” — the horse meat scandal which broke in the UK and Europe in 2014 — caused an international stir, although its victims were morally outraged rather than physically ill. Horse meat is safe to eat, but the fraud was in the mislabelling of the burger patties and ready-meals as beef, when in fact there was a good kick of horse in there — almost 30% in one sample. The outcry was mainly in the UK and Ireland, said Dr Pamela Byrne, the chief executive officer of Ireland’s Food Safety Authority, because unlike those in many European countries, “we don’t like to eat horses”. “We were blindsided by horse meat,”

Byrne said, “but we learnt fast”. South Africa’s own mislabelled processed meat scandal broke at the same time — one meat sample was infamously found to contain donkey traces — but mostly it was a case of butchery staff not bothering to clean the mincers properly between different types of meat. The mislabelling came to light after Stellenbosch University food scientists collected and DNA-tested 139 meat samples. The same scientists found that a Cape Town restaurant specialising in “exotic” meats was guilty of widespread misrepresentation, passing off pork as warthog and ostrich as springbok. Such fakery is not something the government is likely to uncover. “We are not pro-active like the EU,” said Penny Campbell, director of food control with the health department. “We just don’t have the analytical capability yet.” Now there’s something to chew on.