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"It's national pride. They want their country standard to be the international standard."
Ellen Matten, international issues analyst for the U.S. Codex Office, on Japan's reaction to a soy sauce dispute with the U.S., which wants all soy sauces created the same way.
(September 29, 2004, Washington Post)

#21 Soy Sauce, Kimchi, and The Golden Rule Those of us that live in the ICT standards space tend to forget that there are parallel universes of standards almost too numerous to mention. The inhabitants of these alternative realities concern themselves with specifications relating to construction, safety, fuel, and just about anything else you can (or can't) think of.

But while the standards of these other standards spheres may vary widely, the behavior of those that set them remains comfortably, if sometimes regrettably, familiar.

All of which brings us to the vital subject of the latest and most contentious battle to roil the global standards marketplace: I refer, of course, to the donnybrook over that most piquant and ubiquitous of all Japanese condiments: soy sauce.

Yes, Virginia, there is (or at least shortly will be) an international standard for soy sauce. But will it describe the real deal – the traditionally brewed and fermented condiment beloved of the Japanese? Or will it specify some mass-produced, flavor-enhanced, artificially colored American concoction instead? Finally, will U.S. - Japanese relations take an irreparable hit in consequence, or will diplomacy once more succeed in reconciling East and West?

If all this sounds a bit overwrought, consider this: ICT standards invoke high emotions based entirely on economic concerns, but rarely involve national pride. The composition of traditional food, on the other hand, combines both cultural identity as well as profits – a recipe for a highly combustible mixture.

In fact, food standards are neither rare nor economically insignificant. Champagne, for example, may only be so labeled if it comes from the champagne district of France (a requirement best remembered, *mon ami*, lest you provoke litigation). Until non-French vintages produced using the *methode champagnoise* attained a following on their own, the right to apply the Champagne appellation to a bottle of sparkling white wine conveyed the ability to command a premium price.

In the case of soy sauce, however, it is expediency rather than geography that is driving the dispute. Traditional soy sauce production is a months-long affair, involving wheat, soybeans, a special mold and a three-step process: *Koji*-making (a blending step), brine fermentation (which converts the *koji* to a mash called *moroni* over a period of several months), and refining (through filtration and pasteurization). According to a Website maintained by Kikkoman, the largest seller of traditional soy sauce in the United States, it is the second step in this process "that creates the many distinct flavor and fragrance compounds that build the soy sauce flavor profile."

But there is also an upstart formulation that is sold in greatest quantity under the ConAgra "LaChoy" brand. This fauve soy (as the Japanese regard it), is produced by a brute-force industrial process: soybeans are boiled with hydrochloric acid for 15 to 20 hours, after which the mixture is rapidly cooled,

neutralized, filtered, colored, sweetened, salted and refined. In the view of Kikkoman, the resulting product is “harsh and one-dimensional.”

Not surprisingly, it is not only much faster, but also cheaper to utilize the non-traditional technology to create the condiment. In the view of the Japanese, only a product produced by the centuries-old fermentation methodology should be entitled to be called “soy sauce.” Any effort to label the brown substance created through the ConAgra process as “soy sauce” should be banned as false advertising, and a debasement of a cultural epicurean icon.

Still, how does one go about defending one’s culinary heritage? Only an international standard, created by a global, treaty-backed organization will suffice.

So it is that in 1998, the Japanese food industry approached the imposingly named **Codex Alimentarius Commission** (CAC), and asked that august body to create a standard that would be based upon the recipe and production method used to create traditional Japanese soy sauce. In other words, the standard would be not only a design standard (specifying the required ingredients that would be required to constitute “soy sauce”), but a process standard as well (mandating the method to be used to produce the final product). Those that used the quicker process could still call their product “soy sauce,” but would have to add the words “non-brewed” or “short-term brewed” to the label as well.

Seeking recourse to the CAC entails some degree of risk, however. The CAC was commissioned in 1963 by no less than the United Nations. Once a standard is adopted, all treaty countries must revise their domestic regulations to conform to the standard adopted. Thus, although a given nation may propose its own formulation as the basis for an international food standard, that nation will be bound by the result – whether its own offering becomes the basis of the eventual recipe or not. The Japanese, for example, immediately encountered strong opposition from imposing American trade associations, such as the formidably, if not very delectably, named International Hydrolyzed Protein Council.

How might the Japanese feel about the United States telling them how to make soy sauce? Bruce Silverglade, legal affairs director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, who is assisting Japanese consumer groups in the dispute put it this way, as quoted in a San Francisco Chronicle article: “It’s something to tell Japan how to make soy sauce. Next we’ll be telling France that Spam should be labeled pate.”

Up to this point, one might justifiably conclude that Japan owns the moral high ground on the soy standard issue. Rather than permit Fast Food America to run roughshod over a hallowed Japanese comestible, Japanese industry is seeking redress before the United Nations of food standards, there to plead the case for quality over cost, and culture over international corporate carpet bagging.

So the Japanese would indeed seem to have the equities on their side. At least, until one looks into the sordid history of Japan’s own recent effort to hijack the recipe and process for making *kimchi*, the national epicurean treasure of its neighbor, Korea. Japan, it seems, sought to promote the adoption of an ersatz kimchi made using cheaper ingredients and a quickee industrial process. Do you hear the echoes?

Consider the déjà vu ridden parallels to the current soy standard wars when you read the following excerpt from the Mandala Project’s Website on the effort by Korea to launch a kimchi standard to protect its own cultural heritage:

For the Koreans, Japanese kimchi is not genuine kimchi. It is nothing but copycat kimchi. Korean kimchi is made with Chinese cabbage, red pepper, garlic, salted fish and ginger, and then stored in clay containers to ferment for at least four weeks....However, Japanese kimchi is made with Chinese cabbage and artificial flavor, skipping the fermentation process.

Sound familiar? So also are the emotions at issue. The mission of the Mandala Project, is to “use new technologies and new research approaches to [address the] critical issues of the time’s [sic].” Kimchi, it would appear, is nothing if not a critical issue of the “time’s.” Read further from the same website:

Kimchi is more than a food for the Koreans. It is a kind of national symbol and part of the national identity for Korea. Kimchi is Korean traditional culture itself. Korea has a saying that "the taste of kimchi is the taste of your mother's fingertips."

Passing for the moment on what role the taste of one's mother's fingertips should play in one's adult life, let us see how the kimchi battle was fought. Compromises and tensions typical of an ITC standards process were the order of the day, as evidenced by this update midway through the process:

So far, neither the Japanese nor the Koreans seem satisfied with Codex's draft standard. It defines kimchi as a "fermented" product but permits the use of citric, acetic and lactic acids, none of which are used in the traditional kimchi process. The dispute is expected to intensify as Codex moves closer to ratification.
www2.gol.com/users/coynerhm/kimchi_wars.htm

When the standard was eventually adopted, of course, Korea claimed complete victory, focusing on the attributes that most reflected its traditions. Consider this from the official Korean kimchi site:

By establishing international food standard of Codex kimchi in 2001 centering on Korean cabbage kimchi, Codex admitted that Korea is the suzerain state of kimchi, and now kimchi is international food, not only for Korean but also world people.
www.kimchi.or.kr/eng/data/codex2.html

Japan is still smarting from its defeat in the battle to become the suzerain state of kimchi, and hopes to be more successful in its effort to defend the honor of soy sauce. And why not? This time, Japan has tradition on its side. Will it not be destined to enjoy global hegemony when it comes to its national sauce? We shall see. Japan presented its case before a CAC committee on September 27; that committee will vote whether or not to recommend the issue to the CAC board, for deliberation in Rome next June. Until then, the dispute can only, well, ferment.

But as with standards anywhere, setting the standard does not automatically lead to reaping the economic benefits. Standards in all spheres, from food to ITC, have often failed when the fickle tastes of real customers enter into the equation. As the Koreans found, just because the CAC was persuaded to standardize on real, Korean kimchi (or close enough), that doesn't necessarily mean that "world people" will actually eat it.

Consider the following recent thread in the Food and Dining forum of www.koreabridge.com. Those on line had just discovered a McDonalds in Busan, South Korea that serves pancakes. As benstine21 observed, "i have now had them twice including this morning and they are the standard Mcd's fare. really good if you ask me but so is anything compared to kimchi." Another poster took a theological approach to the issue, noting that:

...it very clearly states in the Letters of St. Paul to the Romans that pancakes are better than kimchi for breakfast. The garlic of the kimchi does have some proven health benefits, but you can't beat raw, unadulterated SUGAR for that morning blast that is guaranteed to knock you off your horse on the road to Damascus.
RRRROOOOOOAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRR!!!!!!

Sadly, we were unable to learn which translation of the Epistles the author relied upon for this intriguing interpretation, as the entry was simply signed, "Today's post was brought to you by the letter I and the number 18."

www.koreabridge.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=2572

So there you have it. We in the ICT space are not alone. Even when the stakes are as high as preservation of the integrity of soy or kimchi, the standards process may involve people behaving badly, as the temptation to game the system becomes too great to bear. So also, nationalism may stand in the way of globalism, and profit may be the thief and the enemy of piquancy. But there is yet reason to hope that this saga of soy will end as happily as the kimchi caper – thanks to the CAC.

If there is a moral for readers of this humble Blog to learn from such food standards wars, it may be this: Standards, like fine foods, are the product of careful and often laborious processes. Spare the process, and you're sure to spoil the "soy."

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Useful Links and Information:

I. The Wonderful World of Traditional Soy Sauce:

Origins: *Jiang, a soy sauce precursor, was first produced in China as far back as 500 B.C. In the classic mode of seemingly all oriental stories that find their way to the occident, it was a Zen priest that brought epicurean enlightenment from China to Japan some thousand years later. Thereafter, soy sauce evolved as a distinctly Japanese culinary institution. It was not until the 1800s that soy sauce began to find its way to the United States, along with oriental laborers. By 1972, demand for traditionally prepared soy sauce was robust enough to lead the Kikkoman Corporation (purveyors of fine soy sauce since the 1600s) to open their first American production facility, in Walworth Wisconsin. For more on the history, ingredients, and manufacture of traditional soy sauce, see:*

www.shejapan.com/jtyeholder/jtye/living/shoyu/shoyu_index.html

East (doesn't) Meet West: *For a comparison of traditional and "brute force" soy sauce production techniques, see:*

[www.kikkoman-](http://www.kikkoman-usa.com/pages/consumer/basics/natural_brewing.asp?loc=101&subsection=basics&subsection2=art)

[usa.com/pages/consumer/basics/natural_brewing.asp?loc=101&subsection=basics&subsection2=art](http://www.kikkoman-usa.com/pages/consumer/basics/natural_brewing.asp?loc=101&subsection=basics&subsection2=art)

www.japantoday.com Thread on the Soy Standards Wars:

www.japantoday.com/e/?content=quote&id=1183#bbspost

If the above food standards tales are still not familiar enough, we should observe that China has set its own soy standard relating to certain ingredients. One article at the People's Daily website sternly states that Chinese condiment factories "should not fight a suicidal war among domestic partners," a sentiment that many married couples would do well to heed. See:

EU's Ban on China's Soy Sauce is a Sheer Rumor: Official

http://english.people.com.cn/english/200103/28/eng20010328_66242.html

II. Kimchi and the Korean National Identity:

Kimchi Wars: *The Mandala Project examines the Japan-Korea Kimchi dispute (author: Misuzu Nakamura, May 2001):*

www.american.edu/TED/kimchi.htm#r1

III. Codex Alimentarius Commission:

The Codex Alimentarius Commission was formed in 1963 by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization, each an agency of the United Nations. It is based in Rome Italy. As stated on the CAC home page, its charter is: "to develop food standards, guidelines and related texts such as codes of practice under the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme. The main purposes of this Programme are protecting health of the consumers and ensuring fair trade practices in the food trade, and promoting coordination of all food standards work undertaken by international governmental and non-governmental organizations."

Codex Alimentarius Commission Website:
www.codexalimentarius.net/web/index_en.jsp

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