

CURRENTS

You may just freak out when you learn what's in your soy milk

Bug Juice

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Vegitarian/vegan restaurateur Peggy Raisglid didn't know it, but there was something not-so-plantlike in the Trader Joe's strawberry soy milk she had been selling her customers.

An eagle-eyed patron at Lovin' Spoonfuls, 2990 N. Campbell Ave., spotted the strawberry soy milk in the refrigerated display case behind the register and discreetly pulled her aside to ask: "Do you know that soy milk has carmine in it, which is ground-up insects?"

Vegetarians, of course, steer clear of consuming animal flesh, but Raisglid thinks even avowed carnivores would be turned off if they realized what they were drinking. "I think that people who eat animals don't want to eat insects," she said.

As Raisglid sees it, the problem is that most people don't know what carmine is, and the ingredients list on the soy milk packaging only identifies it as "color."

Carmine is derived from the cochineal, a scale insect in the family Dactylopiidae. There are many species of the bug, including one indigenous to the Sonoran Desert. The variety most commonly used for coloring, *Dactylopius coccus*, is found primarily in Mexico.

Carl Olson, associate curator of the University of Arizona's Insect Research Collection, characterized the cochineal as an immobile "feeding bag" that produces a white, waxy substance to protect itself as it sucks the juices of cacti. "All these things do is sit under the wax, put their beak into the cactus pad and drink," he said.

The female cochineal is used to make dye. Harvesters peel away the waxy shell to reveal the engorged bugs, about a quarter of an inch long, attached to the cacti. Insects are collected, dried and pulverized in preparation for making the colorant.

Cochineal has a long history of being used as a dye. Spaniards took note of the radiant red textiles produced by Aztecs in the early 16th century. Spain introduced the dried insect to Europe, and it soon became a precious commodity that displaced less vivid red colorants.

The scarlet dye was used on the distinctive attire of British redcoats, Canadian mounties, Catholic cardinals and Hungarian hussars. People then started using it in cosmetics and food.

Artificial dyes led to cochineal's decline in the late 19th century. But concerns in the 1990s about the health effects of synthetic food coloring, and a resultant push for "natural" alternatives, made harvesting the insect profitable again. Today, cochineal is used to achieve pink, red and purple colors in yogurts, candy, grapefruit juice, artificial crab meat,



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popsicles and Campari.

It's also used in Trader Joe's strawberry soy milk, which sells for \$1.29 and is advertised as a "Great Treat for Kids." Raisglid said she was "appalled" that the packaging didn't clearly indicate that carmine is an insect extract, as it's widely known that many vegetarians and vegans drink soy milk.

She contacted Trader Joe's West Coast corporate headquarters, thinking they might not know what was in the soy milk. But she said a product manager quickly set her straight.

When asked by Raisglid why Trader Joe's didn't clearly indicate that carmine is derived from insects, the product manager allegedly said they never claimed the soy milk was suitable for vegetarian consumption.

"I think obviously the reason they don't put 'insect' on the product is they know nobody would buy it if they did," Raisglid said. "It seems kind of nefarious to knowingly and wittingly do it."

The *Weekly* finally reached Trader Joe's spokeswoman Alison Mochizuki on the fourth attempt over two days. She huffed that she was aware a reporter had left messages for her about the strawberry soy milk.

Mochizuki said the product had been discontinued and would be off shelves "soon," without giving a specific timetable. She impatiently declared she was driving while talking on her cellular phone and then hung up after saying "thank you."

The *Weekly* called Mochizuki again 30 minutes later, but she didn't answer.

Raisglid said she was told by a Trader Joe's product manager that they were going to let their strawberry soy milk stock run out and not replace it. But she'd like prompt action.

"I think they should just pull it off the

shelf," Raisglid said. "They know they've done something wrong. They knew it was shady going in. She (the product manager) told me they were working with the (manufacturing) company to change the dye."

According to Raisglid, the product manager told her the soy milk was produced by Pacific Foods, of Tualatin, Ore., and then repackaged and distributed by Trader's Joe's. A spokesman with Pacific Foods declined comment, saying the specifics of the deal with their distributor were confidential.

Even if Trader Joe's soy milk labeling wasn't exactly forthright, they weren't breaking the law. Current Food and Drug Administration regulations don't require food manufacturers to explicitly state what carmine or cochineal extract comes from, meaning they can use generic terms, such as "color added," on packaging.

Still, the FDA released a report earlier this year evaluating complaints about a limited number of allergic reactions to cochineal coloring. It found that possible health risks weren't widespread, but did make the recommendation that food and cosmetics clearly indicate that they contain carmine or cochineal extract.

However, the report didn't go so far as to propose that labeling include the fact that the dyes are made from insects. A public comment period on the report and proposed labeling changes ends May 1.

The strawberry soy milk is now banished from Raisglid's restaurant, but she'd still like to see more substantive changes to FDA regulations than the ones being proposed: "Have you ever heard of carmine? No one has, and they're banking on that." **tw**