

What's in the Sauce?

Elizabeth Boyle, Ph.D.
Department of Animal Sciences and Industry
Kansas State University
August 1995

Meat products come in many forms. Products carrying labels stating "spaghetti sauce with meatballs", "beef stew" and "tamales with sauce" are actually meat products according to government regulations. In fact, any food product that contains at least 2 percent poultry or 3 percent meat is a poultry or meat product whose manufacture is monitored by the United States Department of Agriculture, otherwise known as the USDA. The manufacture of all other food products is governed by the Food and Drug Administration, or FDA. If you look closely at the label on a can of "beef ravioli with sauce", the label will carry an inspection legend. The presence of this legend means that the product has met federal inspection standards established by the USDA.

There are specific ingredient requirements that have been established by the USDA for more than 200 popular meat and poultry products. These requirements are called "standards of identity". For example, in order to label a product "beef stew", the stew must contain at least 25 percent meat. "Chili con carne" must contain a minimum of 40 percent meat, while "chili con carne with beans" needs only 25 percent meat in the product. These standards were established so that consumers would get what they expect when purchasing a meat product.

Prepared spaghetti sauces are a common item in many grocery stores. Spaghetti products marketed as "spaghetti with meatballs and sauce" and "spaghetti with meat and sauce" contain at least 12 percent meat. If the product name is listed as "spaghetti sauce with meat" however, there needs to be only 6 percent meat in the product. Many bottled spaghetti sauces carry the label "flavored with meat". These sauces do not contain pieces of meat, only meat flavoring.

Meat ravioli, another pasta product, must contain at least 10 percent meat.

Mexican style meat products are in demand by many consumers. Burritos contain at least 15 percent meat or 10 percent cooked poultry meat. Enchiladas also contain a minimum of 15 percent meat, but require 10.5 percent poultry meat. There must be at least 25 percent meat in tamales. If the tamales are with a sauce, meat must make up 20 percent of the entire product. Prepared tacos contain at least 15 percent meat, but if you purchase taco filling, it must be made with at least 40 percent fresh meat.

For more information about specific standards of identity, contact the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-800-535-4555 or your local county extension office.