

COLUMN ONE

THE CHALLENGE OF KEEPING CHINA KOSHER

The country is a fast-growing producer of kosher-certified food. But inspection and approval require a cultural balancing act—how do you explain the Book of Leviticus in an atheist nation?

By Ching-Ching Ni, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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Rabbi Martin Grunberg is one of a small group of kosher food inspectors who watches over factory workers in China, the world's fastest-growing producer of kosher-certified products. Here he is on a maintenance tour of a Chinese candy factory making kosher-certified toy candies, most of it for export to the U.S. and Israel.

NINGBO, CHINA—It isn't easy being a kosher food inspector in the land of moo shu pork. No matter how hard you try.

“Once, they got me into a restaurant and they ordered a whole plate of food and put it in front of me,” recalls Rabbi Martin Grunberg, who has the unusual task of ensuring that Chinese factories that make food for export comply with ancient Jewish dietary laws. “They were putting me to the test because they really don't understand why I can't eat Chinese cuisine.”

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Keeping kosher is a breeze back home in Jerusalem, but it's a daily challenge here in China, where food is practically a religion and people say they'll eat anything with four legs—except for the table. It means Grunberg can't travel light on his monthly trips through China: He carries two or three suitcases packed with dry goods, canned meats and vacuum-sealed packets, so he can feed himself breakfast, lunch and dinner. That way, he never has to step into a Chinese restaurant where about the only thing he can order is a fruit plate and can of Coke.

Although many here have never heard the word “kosher,” China is now the world's fastest-growing producer of kosher-certified food, with more than 500 Chinese factories producing the approved products. That number is expected to soar, not because this country that is still officially atheist has embraced Judaism, but because it's good for business.

“I used to get this puzzled look, ‘What is kosher?’ “ said Grunberg, 54, a field inspector for the New York-based Orthodox Union, which is responsible for certifying more than 300 plants in China. “Now a lot of people know it as a marketing tool to increase their market share, especially in the United States.”

The largest kosher market in the world is the U.S., where a growing number of the consumers are non-Jews who see kosher-certified food as generally safer and healthier.

That's important in China, which is trying to recover from the recent spate of tainted-food scandals. Eager to regain consumer trust, the “Made in China” label has found an unexpected ally in the once-obscure kosher symbol.

“People have been looking for some other measure of security for products coming out of China,” said Rabbi Shimon Freundlich, one of a handful of Beijing-based independent kosher field inspectors. “They want to see quality control, and kosher is a standard people know.”

As China in recent years has become a factory for the world, practically anything can be made here at a bargain. The unlikely kosher business flourished simply because of supply and demand: The global appetite for kosher products exploded and China is happy to feed the frenzy.

But even after the Chinese learned basic kosher rules—no pork, no shellfish, no fish without fins or scales—misunderstandings remain.

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As the calls poured in from Chinese companies looking for kosher approval, Freundlich recalls explaining why he couldn't certify a toy maker that produced plastic food.

"They sent me samples of fake apples, fake vegetables," Freundlich said. "They were right about the food aspect. They didn't know we don't do wooden toys or plastic toys."

Then there was the guy who makes dining room tables.

"Since food goes on the table he thought we needed a kosher table," Freundlich said. "Of course, every table is kosher."

It's even hard for many Chinese to grasp the meaning of "rabbi."

"Sometimes they call me 'rabbit,' " Grunberg said. "I start hopping. They don't get it. I let it pass. It doesn't pay to explain."

In the frigid Chinese winter, Grunberg, a grandfather of five, keeps his white beard relatively short and covers his head with a wool hat. He keeps his yarmulke in his pocket and puts it on only when the room is warm enough. The Israeli resident has long given up on wearing his wide-brimmed black hat when traveling across China. "They get squashed," he said, during the extended transits by plane, bus and train.

It's harder for Freundlich, 34, to blend in. His black beard is much longer and bushier, and some Chinese he meets can't resist tugging at it with their fingers.

"They used to call me Santa Claus," said Freundlich, who moved to Beijing with his family in 2001 to start a Jewish community center. Then came the Sept. 11 attacks. "They started calling me Bin Laden, which is unfortunate."

But they don't mean any harm by it, he said. For the most part, rabbis are treated with respect, even if the Chinese know very little about the Jewish people and their religion.

"In China, we have very little contact with the Jewish people," said Lucy Qian, the general manager at Ningbo Gooddays Food, a factory that makes mostly novelty candies here in one of China's manufacturing hubs. "We are doing this purely because of market demand."

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Since the factory went kosher a few years ago, sales have soared 40%, she said. Her primary customers are Israelis and Americans who want such things as kosher lipstick-shaped Barbie candy, some of which ends up on the shelves of places like Wal-Mart.

The tainted-food scandals, she said, had no impact on her business last year. In fact, sales grew.

“I’m sure the kosher certification helped,” Qian said.

For now, finished products such as candy, fish and some dehydrated vegetables are a small component of the Chinese-made kosher market. The bulk of the business is in raw materials and food additives, but that is likely to change very soon, according to the Orthodox Union, which expects huge growth in the demand for kosher snacks, soft drinks and even beef.

Jewish dietary rules originate in the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Book of Leviticus. But rabbis working in China try to sidestep serious discussions on religion to avoid political minefields in a country where anything other than state-sanctioned church activities are strictly forbidden.

Once, Grunberg said, an official asked him during a public function to explain what religious law kosher is based on. Caught off guard, the rabbi quickly emphasized the common ground between the Chinese and Jewish people, who share long histories of pride and persecution.

“I didn’t bring religion or God into the equation,” Grunberg said.

That’s just fine to pragmatic Communist Party officials, who see little contradiction in describing their brand of unbridled capitalism as “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Tolerating unfamiliar foreign ideas seems a small price to keep the export-driven economy humming.

“The biggest benefit of going kosher is that it introduces more accountability,” said Ray Cheung, a Chinese broker who acts as a bridge between Chinese companies seeking kosher approval and Jewish agencies that certify them. “The rabbi inspectors need to know where each ingredient is made and be able to trace it back to the factory that made it. If you don’t provide that information, we don’t give you the certification.”

Certification can be labor-intensive for the rabbis.

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During a recent trip to the Gooddays candy factory, which requires four annual inspections, Grunberg checked long lists of raw materials and poked around every warehouse and factory floor, picking up bottles of sweetener and food coloring, asking if there had been any changes in the suppliers and if the buckets on the floor were used to store anything other than kosher products.

Sometimes, despite the best of intentions, he has to turn the applicant down.

Once, he said, he traveled to far western China to watch Tibetan herders using a primitive method to turn yak milk into casein, a dairy protein used as a food additive.

“It was like a million Tibetans all privately cooking this on their stoves—every home is a little factory,” Grunberg said. “It would be an impossible type of supervision.”

Then the Chinese government stepped in to form a company that supplied the Tibetans with cows and a place to milk them by machine. Grunberg went back and certified the liquid milk that will be used for the casein.

The rabbi’s requirements don’t always go over well with productivity-crazed Chinese plant owners.

“Somebody once called me and asked me to come bless the fish,” said Freundlich, referring to a company that processes Alaskan fish for the American market.

“I told him that’s not the way it works.”

But even Freundlich wasn’t prepared for what he faced when he got to the fish plant.

Jewish law says fish must have fins and scales to be kosher. But with frozen fish, it is difficult to tell which ones do. So even though the plant had processed thousands of fish, Freundlich says he rolled up his sleeves to check them by hand. He and a partner worked three days straight, scratching each one of the 37,000 fish with their gloved fingers.

So many fish in the sea look the same,” said Freundlich. “If I can’t find the scale or the fin, it can’t be eaten.”

chingching.ni@latimes.com