

Food additives other than colours and sweeteners

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Cream lovers throughout Europe will be rejoicing this weekend at the news that Parliament's Committee has fought off further attempts to adulterate their favourite indulgence. Already up to 38 additives are authorized for use in pasteurized cream - a foodstuff commonly regarded by consumers as relatively unprocessed. When the European Commission proposed extending still further the list of permitted additives in such cream, the committee took the view that enough was enough and threw out the proposal. Mrs Hiltrud BREYER (Greens, D), opposing the Commission, said it was incomprehensible why further additives were needed. Countries such as Austria, where a great deal of whipped cream was consumed, did not want the extra additives. The committee adopted a draft report by Mrs Breyer on a Commission proposal for a directive amending Directive 95/2/EC on food additives other than colours or sweeteners. Directive 95/2/EC regulates most of the additives authorized for use in food in Europe. Only those additives listed in the annexes to the directive may be used. While welcoming the existence of a standardized Europe-wide system for authorizing additives, which was of benefit to consumers, Mrs Breyer regretted that the Commission had not taken the opportunity to respond to consumer demands for a reduction in the multiplicity of additives, the technological need for which, she told members, was often unproven. A new approach, not based on the say-so of food manufacturers, was needed. In response, the committee accepted several of the rapporteur's specific recommendations. Thus, apart from opposing new additives for pasteurized cream and pasteurized or sterilized milk, it also rejected the authorization of new additives to prolong the shelf-life of certain fruit and vegetables, to enhance the flavour of margarine, to soften chewing gum and to give rice a shinier appearance. The committee also rejected the authorization of an additive which could have increased the sugar input in sweet drinks attractive to children. Also thrown out were proposals for the use of sulphur compounds in dried apples and pears and hydrochloric acid in mozzarella cheese. Stressing the need for foodstuffs containing additives to be adequately labelled, the committee insisted on comprehensive labelling comparable to that laid down in the novel foods directive. In addition, labelling should provide the information needed by allergy sufferers. Members also paid special attention to additives in food for infants. Finally, the committee decided to make a second stab at getting processed eucheuma seaweed (E 407a), a gelling agent exported by the Philippines, reclassified as E 408 so as to prevent it being confused with the highly refined seaweed extract carrageenan (E 407). The committee argues that eucheuma is less purified than carrageenan and could pose health risks. However, the last time the committee tried this (October 1996), its proposal was thrown out by the House.