

Death in The Pot?

Another day, another food scare.

Or so it seems in the UK at least, where hardly a day goes by without another tabloid headline about pesticide residues, preservatives, colourants, and a hundred other supposedly deadly chemical dangers.



Yet our food is probably safer now than it has ever been.

Says who? Dr Andrew Wadge - Chief Scientist of the Food Standards Agency (FSA), the UK's official food safety watchdog!

Dr Wadge visited Jealott's Hill last week at the invitation of the Analytical Science group, who were holding an Open Day to showcase their work. As part of his visit he gave a fascinating seminar on the work of the FSA, including some insights into why the UK seems so perpetually paranoid about food.

The role of the FSA – a non-ministerial Government department set up in the wake of the BSE crisis - is to ensure safer food and to promote healthy eating for all. Renowned for basing its recommendations on sound scientific evidence and risk assessment, the FSA funds analytical method development, screening, and, crucially, a huge number of surveys on things like residue levels in food.

One of the guiding principles of the FSA is transparency – the surveys are published and freely accessible to public scrutiny. Perversely, this work is often taken out of context to feed the media frenzy.

"It is ironic," said Dr Wadge, "that all this work, done for safety, is then used to produce alarmist headlines in the press."

Not surprisingly, the FSA's science based approach often brings it into conflict with certain NGOs, who would much rather it existed solely to back their agenda.

But perhaps the UK has always been paranoid about food, and sometimes with good reason – one of Dr Wadge's first slides was of the cover of a book published in 1820 on the subject of culinary contaminants and poisons, subtitled rather alarmingly 'Death in the Pot!'

So next time you see a food scare in the press, remember that the FSA recommends you take it with a pinch of salt...well, maybe not salt...a glass of red wine perhaps, or a piece of dark chocolate...

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