Cajun food fight brewing

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Cajun pepper sauce stewed in Tennessee, Cajun wine bottled in California, Cajun beer brewed in Wisconsin — products like these have Louisiana food manufacturers hot as cayenne pepper.

A coalition of producers has organized the Louisiana Logo Committee and is considering legal action to force out-of-state manufacturers to take “Cajun” off their labels.

The group also is designing a logo to put on Louisiana-made products to distinguish them from what they call the Cajun counterfeiters.

“Cajun really identifies with a specific geographic area and a specific ethnic group of people,” said Si Brown, president of Bruce Foods Corp. in New Iberia, La.

Tennessee manufacturer Fred Hafer disagreed.

“I’d like to be the lawyer that would fight that one. That’s a generic term, as far as I’m concerned,” said Hafer, president of Gourmet Foods Inc. of Knoxville, manufacturer of Cajun Sunshine hot pepper sauce.

A “Cajun” label is apparently a good sales device, given the international craze for Acadian food.

However, state officials complain they have found Cajun labels on at least two dozen products manufactured far from south Louisiana where the Acadians settled in the 1700s.

State Agriculture Commissioner Bob Odom said some of the labels list Louisiana phone numbers that are called-forward to out-of-state businesses.

Some list addresses that are really shipping warehouses and not manufacturing locations, he said.

Other products identify the manufacturers as out-of-state but label the product as Cajun.

Gourmet Foods’ Cajun Sunshine is among them. Although a Tennessee operation, Gourmet has ties to Louisiana: it is owned by venerable New Orleans coffee merchant William B. Reilly & Co.

“I can understand Louisiana’s feelings about that. I’ve said over the last two or three years that the proliferation of Cajun products hurt some that were making more of a genuine Cajun product. You look where it was made and it was made in New Jersey or Wisconsin.

“But they should feel kindly toward us. The basic ingredient in all our products comes from Louisiana — pepper mash,” Hafer said.

Hafer said Gourmet’s Louisiana pepper mash purchases are in six figures annually.

“I can appreciate what Louisiana is saying, but on the other hand I think that’s stretching a point. To attack people in other parts of the country, I think they’re way off base,” Hafer said.

Sherry Bando, general manager of the New Orleans School of Cooking in New Orleans, agreed that a product doesn’t have to be made in Louisiana to be Cajun.

“The word describes a people and a heritage, not a geographic location,” Bando said.

But she also complained that some manufacturers try to make Cajun products without understanding either the people or the heritage.

“They’re just looking for the promotion or the popularity without understanding the thing itself. Anyone resents things being used out of context,” said Bando.

Alfonso Navia, vice president of Mulate’s Cajun Style Beer Co. in south Louisiana, said he first reacted defensively when he heard about The Original Cajun Beer, a product brewed in Wisconsin.

“Our beer is a little sweet. The others are pouring Tabasco in it and say just because it burns your throat it’s Cajun,” Navia said.

Ken Reiff, owner of Orleans Hill Winery, the Woodland, Calif., manufacturer of Cajun White Wine and Cajun Red Wine, said, “I’m not trying to rip them off. I just didn’t think there was a good wine to go with the food.

“If you look at our label, it says ‘California’ and under that it says ‘Cajun White.’ That label has had approval from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. And it’s been trademarked in California. Right on the label it says it’s a California product,” Reiff said.

Odom said the agriculture department figures that “Cajun” on the label may be a violation of federal and state laws unless the product really originates from Louisiana.

“A lot of people have labeled hot sauce as ‘Louisiana hot sauce,’ and they’ve been made to stop from that mislabeling. They can only call it Louisiana hot sauce,” Brown said.

“They can call it ‘Cajun style’ all day long,” he said.

“We feel it’s very important we pursue the protection of the Cajun heritage and defend it against misuse and damage done by inferior products. We feel our Cajun cooking heritage is extremely important to the state of Louisiana and we intend to protect it,” Brown said.