

Europe cheesed off about Canadian food labels

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OTTAWA - Most Canadians already know the difference between champagne and sparkling wine, but what about Parma ham and Camembert cheese? Why are they special?

One reason is that the Europeans want Canadian producers to stop using those words on their labels.

They argue it's like a brand name where consumers recognize those products as the best. But words like Parma and Camembert are actually supposed to refer to the specific place they're from or the way they're made.

Canadian negotiators have just returned from trade talks with the European Union, where they reportedly talked about the words used to label products, called geographical indications.

A January draft agreement shows the Europeans don't want Canadian products even using words like "style" or "flavour" to hint to consumers what our version copies. So "feta-style cheese" wouldn't be allowed, for example.

International Trade Minister Peter Van Loan would only say Canada does its talking at the negotiating table.

"They of course have their set of issues they want to negotiate and their range of issues. (Geographical indications is) one of the items that is being negotiated through the process," he said.

Jason Langrish, head of the Canada-Europe Round Table for Business, says any change to product labelling could affect everyone in the food chain, from producers to distributors to grocery stores.

"It has an implication beyond the producers of food," Langrish said.

"Grocery stores could be confused. They'll take an existing product and have to rename it and then they'll have consumer confusion," he said.

Matthias Brinkmann, the head of the European Union delegation in Canada, turned down an interview request.

The next round of negotiations will be in Ottawa next October.