Chicken is certainly one of the world’s favourite and cheapest sources of protein. The demand for chicken is huge and South Africa is no exception. Astral Foods Limited (or Astral as it is known for short) is a leading South African poultry producer, with poultry plants in Olifantsfontein, Standerton and Cape Town. The Earlybird farm in Olifantsfontein is the oldest of the three and is but one of the company’s impressive array of poultry brands, which include the likes of Goldi, Festive Chicken and County Fair.

Astral’s three poultry plants processes a whopping 3,980,000 broilers per week, 207,000,000 broilers per year, has 30,000,000 broilers on the ground at any given time, and hatches 950,000 chicks every day. Despite these impressive figures (and this is not counting what our other poultry processors are turning out daily) the country is bombarded by chicken imports estimated at approximately five million carcasses per week. The imports exceed what a company such as Astral can produce and process. Total local production, in fact, is 18.5 million carcasses per week.

These imports, says Astral CEO, Chris Schutte, are cheap and represent a classical case of dumping. Because it is cheap, these imports are increasing at an alarming rate. Import levels in December 2010 were 42% higher than figures noted in December 2009. The only way in which to counter these imports is to deliver a qual-
ity product, and to inform the consumer accordingly. But this is not a simple case of black and white. When stories such as the ‘botox’ chicken accusations hit the media, it can damage an industry which is known for its integrity, good practices and quality products.

Brine issues

“The irony,” says Chris, “is that the cheap imports flooding our country is actually reworked chicken. The consumer is definitely not getting what he is paying for. These carcasses are frozen at the point of packaging, transported across the sea, disseminated and transported upon arrival, defrosted at the point of further processing, reworked into whatever product is required, and frozen again. The products that land on our plates and in many a takeaway box, have undergone numerous processes, including being frozen and refrozen, and treated with brine.”

Let’s first put the issue of brine ‘injected’ chicken into perspective. Brine-enhanced chicken is not a trade secret and this practice has been an accepted way of enhancing flavour for close on twenty years. Frozen chicken, explains Chris, was generally regarded as lacking in taste and flavour. Hence brine injection and flavour enhancement techniques were developed to enhance the flavour of the frozen product and to present the consumer with a much more tasty, succulent, tender chicken.

It’s in the taste

And the proof, in this case, is definitely in the pudding. Goldi Chicken is by far Astral’s biggest brand in Africa and is a brine-enhanced product. The product time and again passes taste panels (including blind tasting) with flying colours, and is indicated as the best-tasting product, even in the presence of fresh chicken.

“Success in the market depends on taste,” says Chris. “Our IQF range is highly competitive and we have to focus on taste, if we want to keep it successful and keep our consumers happy.”

The brine used in Astral’s individually quick-frozen (IQF) product range, consists of water, salt, natural starch, thickeners and sugar. All of the ingredients are natural and not engineered. The salt used in Astral’s brine is sea salt. The solids in the brine recipe add up to 3% of the total content, 2% of which comprises salt and the other 1% thickeners. This all adds up to a total salt content in the final poultry product, of 0.7 gram per 100 gram of meat. This is well within the guideline of a high salt level of 1.5 gram per 100 gram as stipulated by the Heart Foundation.

Compared to other products such as canned tuna, tomato sauce and brown bread, which all contain higher levels of salt, flavour enhanced chicken is most definitely a healthier option for the health-conscious consumer. This should also allay all fears caused by the December 2010 reports, stating that the salt levels in brine-injected chicken could pose a health risk.

Reworked chicken

Which brings us to reworked chicken. As explained before, reworked chicken has an added dimension of chicken being frozen, unfrozen, reworked into other products or injected with brine, refrozen and sold. And this is the difference, explains Chris: “Astral does not defrost and rework any returned frozen poultry products at any of its operations.

“In fact, we have very strict quality criteria when it comes to returned products in both fresh and frozen form. Returned products are classified and dealt with accordingly.”
For example, a product classified as a ‘good return’ is made available for sale to staff, the general public and traders, and is indicated as such. However, the majority of returned products are either channelled to the pet food industry or destroyed. Products classified as ‘bad returns’ are past their expiry date and definitely not suitable for human consumption.

Industry standards
In certain stores, you might see labels that read ‘Fresh to frozen’. This simply means that a fresh product has reached its ‘Best by’ date as stated on the packaging, and that it was then frozen, giving it an extended shelf life in the freezer. When a fresh product is frozen in this way, the product stays frozen and will not be unfrozen for reworking. This is simply not an accepted industry practice.

“And with this we are not saying the reworked poultry products are rotten,” says Chris. “We simply want consumers and the hospitality industry to know that reworking is not an illegal practice, but it is definitely not the industry standard among the well-known poultry processors in South Africa, including ourselves.”

Legislation
When the Consumer Protection Act becomes effective on 1 April 2012, all poultry processors in South Africa will be required to indicate brine levels on the label. Regulation 146 of the Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act, No 54 of 1972, requires that the percentage of meat and percentage of water be declared on all packaging, come end March 2012.

In addition to consumers having to take responsibility and reading what they buy, it is also very important that consumers acquaint themselves with accepted practices and terminology. This will make for a highly informed consumer public who knows what they are buying and what they are consuming. It will also hopefully encourage our public to buy local and support our local industry.

Things you should know
- The term ‘brine injection’ is a bit misleading. A sophisticated machine is used to inject the chicken to make it more succulent.
- The benefits of brine marinated chicken includes improved moisture holding capacity and cooked yield, while flavour, colour, succulence and tenderness is improved.
- IQF chicken is excellent value for money and the brine is not sold at meat price.
- IQF chicken sales were higher in February 2011 than in December 2010, despite the bad press relating to ‘botox’ chicken.
- There is currently no reference in legislation to the water pick-up rates of IQF-products. Legislation does, however, prescribe a maximum water pick-up of 8% for spin-chilled whole bird.