



Foodservice And Food Safety

As the produce industry gathers in Monterey for PMA's annual foodservice conference, there is much to celebrate. The great culinary trends — local, fresh, organic, seasonal — have led white tablecloth chefs to emphasize fresh produce. These trends will work their way through foodservice and lead to greater emphasis on fresh produce.

Yet these same trends must be channeled into safer directions, or the whole industry can find itself at risk.

The bulk of foodservice operates on one of two extremes of the supply chain. At one end of the business, most independents or small chains buy through either a distributor or a local purveyor. A restaurant operator generally has no real ability to assess the food-safety standards of its suppliers and thus no way to evaluate the safety of the food he is cooking with.

A local TV news exposé of the squalor of Los Angeles' 7th Street Market made it clear much of the produce in that filth was going to foodservice, including reasonably well-known chains. Very few operators buying from wholesalers and distributors off the 7th Street Market had any system designed to track anything.

It's not that they didn't want safe food; many were dealing with reputable broadliners who had their own procurement and auditing standards or individual distributors purchasing through foodservice buying groups with rigorous standards. However, getting a good food-safety program was more luck than anything else.

On the other end of the industry are the massive chains with dedicated food-safety staffs and a highly aligned supply chain. Yet Taco Bell, part of the Yum Brands group, became the poster child for food-safety problems in fresh produce in restaurants.

The numbers are always unfair to large players. In the spinach crisis, the largest food-safety outbreak in produce history, about 300 people are known to have gotten sick or died. Even with so virulent a strain of *E. coli* O157:H7, if someone distributed only 5 percent of the volume Natural Selection Food packed under the Dole label on that fateful day in August 2006, only 15 people would be known to be sick — probably less, since some people didn't get tested until after the massive publicity. So, almost inevitably, known food-safety outbreaks will be tracked to products distributed en masse.

In addition, tying together an outbreak to a single source is much easier when all the product is used in the same way. Trace backs from consumer illnesses are based on the use of surveys — what did all these people eat or do in common? If the culprit is fresh-cut lettuce distributed only to Taco Bell, the survey should pick up a commonality. The same quantity of shredded lettuce, distributed to an equal number of independent restaurants, may never be traced back. Why? A Mexican restaurant had it on a taco, a sandwich shop

had it on a wrap, a diner had it in a salad. Making the connection to lettuce is far more difficult.

At the same time, the massively aligned supply chains of big foodservice operators don't guarantee food safety or even a major effort toward it. After all, what alignment does is give the operator power and the question is to what effect that power will be used.

Some operators have reputations for pushing food safety. But in many cases, the aligned supply chain is pushed to supply cheaper product so value prices can be offered and profit margins maintained.

General food-safety expertise is not sufficient. Urging food safety in general is like urging a strong national defense; it can't be effectuated in abstract. Food safety in produce depends on hundreds of small decisions. How deep must the fences go to stop burrowing

animals? What kind of training and incentive systems are required for field workers? If food-safety experts at major chains don't know about these things, they will be ineffectual in making changes for the better.

Food-safety personnel must operate independently of other corporate considerations. An iron wall must fall across every company, and the food-safety people have to decide — without reference to anything else — what level of food-safety investment is sufficient to protect large operators against the larger reputational risk they run from an outbreak.

The FDA tells us the vast majority of food-borne illness is never identified or traced back to

a source. Unwittingly, the "foodie" culture encourages behavior that will increase unreported foodborne illnesses substantially — specifically those caused by fresh produce.

Pathogens are equal-opportunity devils — they do not exempt the virtuous yeoman farmer or the organic aficionado; they affect seasonal crops and the counter-seasonal crops equally.

We now have a situation in which reputable distributors spent millions on rigorous food-safety audits and the best chefs prefer their produce delivered in wood crates with the earth still upon them.

This is romanticism, but food safety requires HACCP plans, Good Agricultural Practices, expertise, water testing, soil samples and other tests. Our best chefs must insist the local growers they wish to buy from conform to good food-safety standards.

This means an independent third-party audit to an accepted standard. Suppliers will complain. It costs time and money. It might raise the costs of locally grown produce. But our white tablecloth chefs are in the power position here. If they refuse to buy from unaudited suppliers, these local growers will get their audits.

Chefs who don't insist on this are not just playing roulette with their businesses; they're playing Russian roulette with the lives of their customers.

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