

4-18-14 Farm to Fork

The locavores talk about farm to table but health agents talk about farm to fork.

This discussion of food safety from point of origin to final destination (your mouth) even applies to a routine inspection at our local convenience stores. While talking to the owner during a recent inspection, I noticed that he was carrying a different brand of milk and cream. He explained that he would rather order small amounts every two weeks than large orders, sitting there; some unsold. That's a smart choice. Unfortunately, or so it seemed at first, they were dropped by the big company for the inconvenience of the small orders. So, the store changed providers.

The owner went on to explain how it all worked out to his benefit because the big company's cream was frequently being returned by customers, within the "sell-by date" because it had gone sour. That left a sour feeling for this owner for that company; understandably.

He commented, "I can only think that the packers were leaving the product out on the delivery platform too long."

While I don't know for sure what happened, I do know that this trail of food safety is more complicated than most people realize and it takes many eyes to watch the whole process, farm to fork; when you finally consume the food.

At the farm we have the concerns of how the food, be it animal or vegetable, is fed and watered, rinsed and packed. Is the rinsing water clean? We don't want E. coli on our strawberries.

As the food is shipped, we want it to be treated as it needs to be treated. Does it require refrigeration? If so, people need to provide that, check that, document that cold chain with logs of temperature measurements, including names and signatures. Was the food on the loading dock too long? That should be documented in the "chain of custody"; that is, if people are using them and if they tell the truth.

When the food arrives at the point of sale, say at a grocery store or the point of use, say, at a restaurant, it is up to the person receiving and signing off on that delivery to know what they are accepting. They should not sign off until they have confirmed the condition and the temperature, in addition to a count to confirm the correct product and the amount ordered.

The next responsibility lies with the handling of that order. It is very easy for a busy and perhaps understaffed restaurant to let that order sit on the floor longer than was intended. Refrigerated items really need to go directly to the refrigerators. Frozen items need to go directly to the freezer. These items also need to be dated and placed behind the current products, allowing F-I-F-O, "First In, First Out", to make the best use of their dollars and to keep the food fresh. It is one of many Best Management Practices intended to keep us safe.

If everyone does their job correctly, watching over your food, it will arrive safe and sound for you to consume. At that point it is up to you to rinse the food and to wash your hands and to prevent cross contamination from raw meat. That's right; you are the final person on that chain of custody, even though you are undocumented.

Maybe the people who returned cream while still in its "sell by date" were the weak point, the culprits, who left the cream out in their own kitchen repeatedly and for too long. I don't know. I will never know. I do know that we have that responsibility of keeping the food safe until it enters our mouths. Keeping the food safe from farm to fork involves so many people from all over the world, across the country or from right down the street and it includes you and me, too. Bon appétit!

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