

### 9-3-10 Good Food Can Be Safe Food

I am such a poor typist. When I type the word, “food”, sometimes the word, “good” appears. After all, the letters g and f are right next to each other. In life, away from the keyboard, I like it when both “good” and “food” appear together.

And that makes me think that a little clarification on food safety is in order. The ongoing concern of salmonella bacteria existing in an unknown portion of millions of eggs has many people paying attention to the methods of cooking that will render that food safe to eat. That is certainly a good thing.

Knowledge and awareness lead to thinking and thinking leads to decision making. That’s a good thing, too. Right?

But what if the knowledge and thinking leads to misunderstandings? Depending on the situation, there might an error, of sorts; or, perhaps, just some unnecessary missing out on quality moments and risk-free choices in life.

Take for instance the knowledge that an undercooked boiled, poached or fried “over easy” egg always runs the risk of salmonella contamination. The risk is not in every egg but we have no way of knowing which egg has or does not have salmonella in it. So, the risk is always there. This renewed awareness brought about by the Great Egg Recall of 2010 has reminded people to be aware of how their food is prepared and cooked.

Being bombarded every day with an overload of information, our minds tend to work with associations. We can deal with particulars in our area of specialty but what do we do with the rest? We do well to link and associate. The latest link getting many people’s mental attention is “Cook sufficiently.” That message is then linked to other associations such as “Cook all foods sufficiently”.

While that might sound like a wise conclusion, it just might also include some unnecessary overcooking.

Cooking the egg to thickness, rather than runny, or to a temperature of 150 degrees renders the egg yolk safe. But let’s admit it, whether we are ordering eggs at a restaurant or taking orders for the family at our own kitchen, we tend to use phrases such as well done or over easy. That’s where the association comes in. We use similar phrases with meat. We order meat as rare, medium rare or well done. And that is where some of those phrases get linked with the egg recall.

There’s an important difference between eggs and meat beyond the obvious. If you are opposed to eating meat, you might eat eggs. Eggs might have salmonella in them and so should

be cooked sufficiently to destroy that bacteria. If you do eat meat, you might as well know when you can eat meat safely as medium rare or even rare. That's right; even as rare. And there's a good reason why, too.

That salmonella that just might be in the egg; it is inside the egg. Inside. Already. We have no choice but to cook it sufficiently, in addition to being careful with hand washing and other means of cross contamination.

Meat, on the other hand, comes in two basic varieties: whole and ground. Oh, sure, there's chopped and minced and pounded and pierced. Here's the thing to remember: Picture a piece of meat that is what we call, "whole muscle". That's your steak. If, by chance, there are any bacteria on that whole muscle piece of meat, it is on the outside. As soon as that steak hits the grille or pan, the bacteria are destroyed.

Ground meats, on the other hand, are another story. It is relatively easy for bacteria to arrive on the surface of anything, including meat. When that meat is sent through a grinder, the outer surface is sent to the center, as the substance turns and turns. What was initially on the surface only and relatively easy to deal with, is now in the center and scattered throughout. If there were any bacteria on the surface of that original piece of meat, it is now blended throughout and the only way to destroy it, is to thoroughly cook the ground meat all the way though. That is why the ever popular hamburger is always a concern.

You can still order your steak as medium rare or even as rare, if that piece of meat was not skewered, stabbed, or in some way penetrated. That is, if the chef understands the importance of all this. And that is why I am thankful that Massachusetts adopted in 2000 the Federal Food Code and requires a "Person In Charge" of food safety to have taken a food safety course, where he or she will learn all about what measures are required to keep and render food safe for consumption.

I am still and will probably always be a poor typist but I hope that good and food are always linked, for the sake of both safety and quality.

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