



A Message to Public Officials on Food Safety (Edited)

by Brian Snyder, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture

Food safety is in the headlines on a regular basis, usually associated with a scare involving pathogens in hamburger or some other widely distributed product, and it is invariably followed by discussions, and sometimes legislation intended to address the danger to the public represented by the incident. Centers for Disease Control estimates that approximately 5,000 deaths occur in the U. S. each year from food-borne pathogens, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration delights in reporting that "...only 37,313 were killed in motor vehicle crashes in 2008.

The natural desire of government to devise a legislative solution is understandable and legitimate, but it is NOT the job of the government to eliminate risk in life altogether. Plain talk is needed on the real issues in this area. [Editors Summary]

We at PASA believe quite simply that the most important thing anyone can do to reduce risk in the food system is to make it as locally-based as possible. A safe food system is built on trust, and trust is built on actual human relationships. Such relationships are harder to maintain the larger and more diffuse the food system becomes.

Furthermore, we contend that the greatest risks to food safety occur when two systemic factors are combined.:a) "food anonymity" and b) geographically broad distribution patterns. The most basic strategies for achieving a safe food supply, therefore, are not only to keep the distribution patterns as local and/or regional as possible, but also to put the farmers' faces back on the food. In an ideal scenario, both strategies would occur. Whatever else is said about specific practices on a farm or in a food processing facility, these two factors should be acknowledged as priorities and properly rewarded by the regulatory authorities right up front.

With this in mind, the following three-tiered structure seems both to be the current reality in food production and marketing systems, and a necessary framework for any successful effort to further regulate food safety and security:

Farm-direct - This includes farm stands, farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) programs (e.g. subscription farms) and other innovative strategies where the relationship between individual farmers and consumers is immediate and understood.

Identity-preserved - This involves distribution patterns on a regional scale where the farmer and consumer do not necessarily meet, but the identity of the farm is preserved on products all the way through the system, from field to fork.

Commodity stream - This represents sales where no direct relationship between farms and consumers exists. The farm identity is vague or lost altogether, sources are aggregated and distribution tends to be widespread, including food exported to other countries.

Taking them one at a time, we believe there should be minimal intervention by the government in regulating practices in the first tier, with respect to private transactions occurring between individual farms and consumers. This means neither that food safety issues are irrelevant at that level, nor that regulatory officials should be prohibited from taking action and even shutting down farm-direct operations demonstrated to be making people sick. It just means that problems arising here can quite naturally be traced quickly and addressed effectively without associated threats to any broad segment of the population.

With the second tier, it is most important to understand that the government has a tremendous opportunity to take advantage of the good things currently happening out there. The goodwill and positive business practices of farmers, processors and retailers who are already participating in local and regional food system initiatives are ensuring a significant degree of traceability that should be supported in any way possible.

Let me say this as plainly as possible. The government has every right to set reasonable standards for food quality and safe production practices. Nonetheless, farmers with their names - and reputations - listed on every package of food should have options to work on a voluntary basis with independent, third-party entities of their choosing in meeting such standards. Such partnering entities might include certifiers of organic, sustainable or natural products, farm cooperatives, breed associations and other trade organizations with a direct interest in supporting best management practices on the farms they serve.

The third tier represents the vast majority of food product consumed in this country and almost all that is exported to others. The need here for clearly stated and enforced quality and safety standards is obvious and should be a central priority of any food-related legislative agenda in the immediate future. A majority of folks involved with our nation's food system would, I believe, acknowledge this point, so I will not go on about it at length. Suffice it to say that traceability and accountability must either be built right into the core of a farming operation from the start, or these principles must be imposed from the outside.

The essential element here is not that there is some theoretical distinction between "good" and "bad" farmers, but a firm acknowledgement that SOME farmers have chosen to stand behind their products, by name and reputation, all the way to the point of final consumption. This is also not fundamentally an issue of "big farms" vs. "small farms," though it appears unavoidable that vocal contingents on both sides of that divide will try to make it so.

The most pressing concern right now is that, in the rush to do something productive on the most public aspects of safety and security in the food supply, our public officials might take action that will a) do too little, for fear of offending some of the powerful interests involved, or b) do too much and thereby inflict real damage onto one of the most promising trends in agriculture to come along in at least half a century.

Taking these basic considerations into account right now can assist elected officials in focusing on the real issues

involved in maintaining the safety and security of our food supply. They can thereby avoid excessive government intrusion and expense that might negatively affect the entire American food system, including farmers, eaters and taxpayers alike. Such . consideration could also go a long way in helping to ensure that many of us do not take unnecessary risks on our nation's highways this year just to get to more hearings and listening sessions aimed at reducing the danger of an inherently less risky activity, eating food.

But if we can really get this right, a visionary and "fresh" approach concerning food safety at local, state and federal levels of government might lead to an agricultural renaissance in this country that will do as much for the economic health of our rural communities as it will for the physical health of our people .

[Editor's Note: Reprinted from "Passages" (edited) A full version of this article is posted on the CSA Website.]

Swedish Potatoes

- 2 tablespoons butter or oil
- 2 pounds potatoes, thinly sliced
- 1/2 cup chopped onion
- 1 cup shredded cheese
- 2 large eggs
- 1/2 cup sour cream

Use fairly thinly sliced baking potatoes, (Or use a 20-oz. package of frozen french fries) In a large heavy skillet, heat butter and add potatoes and onions. Cook until all ingredients are thoroughly heated but not brown (potatoes start to get "transparent").

Remove from heat and add shredded cheese. Mix thoroughly. In separate bowl beat the large eggs and blend in the sour cream well. Place potato & cheese mix in sprayed casserole and pour large egg - sour cream mix over the top.

Freeze at this point. Potatoes may be covered and refrigerated for 24 hours or frozen up to 2 weeks. Thaw frozen potatoes overnight in refrigerator; bake at 325 degrees for 50 minutes or until thoroughly heated.

Or bake fresh at 350 degrees for 20-30 minutes.

Preservation Tip: Freezing Potatoes

You CAN freeze potatoes successfully for 1-2 months if you select the right potatoes and recipes. Use mature potatoes you have stored at room temperature for at least 30 days. Potatoes with a higher sugar content, such as those stored in the refrigerator, will brown excessively and will be less attractive.

In Your Share* This Week

Potatoes - Greenbranch Organic Farm

Squash - Sunrise Organic Farm

Cucumbers - Calliope Organic Farm

Beets - Calliope Organic Farm

Onions - Calliope Organic Farm

Chard (?) - Calliope Organic Farm

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*Share makeup is best estimate at publication time.

Note: For preservation tips and additional recipes, visit the CSA website at <http://www.providentorganicfarm.com/>

The real "trick" to freezing potatoes is cooking or partially cooking them first. Raw or new potatoes just don't freeze well. I think it has something to do with their water content -they turn mushy!

Cooked potatoes also become mushy when frozen in liquid. Cook in water and drain; or saute grated potatoes in oil. Grated/ shredded potatoes for hash browns freeze well if rinsed or blanched and dried, and mashed potatoes freeze well. Baking potatoes including Yukon Gold freeze better than red potatoes, but if you want to try freezing red potatoes, blanch whole potatoes 5 minutes, pieces 3 minutes before freezing.

It is the starch in raw potatoes that reacts with moisture, enzymes and air and blackens the potatoes. That's why blanching, drying, and fast chilling also reduce the discoloration. *(Recipe and tip from www.ellenskitchen.com)*