

A Food-Service Perspective

Robert E. Harrington*

Thank you for having me on the Reciprocal Meat Conference program. I am not specifically a meat scientist, but rather one of the general technical people in the room.

I want to talk with you today about the National Restaurant Association, the food-service industry, and our industry's perception of this broad issue of food safety in general, and meat safety in particular.

Industry Concern

Of course, for the last year-and-a-half to two years, we have focused on *E. coli* O157:H7, like everyone else. Just about the time we thought we were finally getting it licked and put into perspective, an evening news program, the CBS News, raised the issue again a few weeks ago. We feel, however, that this time they clearly misrepresented the case.

CBS opened the segment with some very emotional film, including footage taken at the funeral of one of the children who had died from *E. coli* O157:H7. Then they said they were going to sample the retail market place to find out just how prevalent this organism is, by sampling meat from six different markets. They claimed that they found various strains of *E. coli* in 60% of the samples. Almost parenthetically, they indicated that some of those strains were intended to inflame the public. We believe it is more than coincidental that that particular program ran during "sweeps" month, when CBS News was trying to increase its market share of viewers.

We're very concerned about the continuing hysteria over food safety, but not because we want to minimize it or trivialize it. At one point in the early discussions of how to manage the response to some of the outbreaks, there were some factions in our industry who said, "Well, let's just point out how few cases there really are." I was one of those who responded to that faction by saying, "How do you plan to answer reporters when they ask you how many dead babies are you willing to accept?" Of course, the answer is none; but we do have to try to keep it in perspective!

Multiple Masters

Consumers are coming back to meat. We're finding that people are asking for meat again, and that meat remains the

*R.E. Harrington, Director of Technical Services, Public Health and Safety, National Restaurant Association, 1200 Seventeenth Street, NW Washington DC 20046-3097.

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center of the plate, despite the efforts of some dining segments representing vegetarianism. Diners are coming back to wanting their meat the way they did a few years ago—which is to say "red and juicy."

However, the food-service industry has a problem, because we have to respond to multiple masters. Ultimately, we have to produce what our customers tell us they want, like everybody else in business. And, regionally, many of our customers tell us that they want their meat rare—including ground beef.

It is relatively easy for the large high-volume producers—the McDonald's, the Burger Kings, the Hardees, etc., to respond. It's simple for them to standardize a process to run patties through a chain broiler, and have all patties come out at the other end at 170° F internal temperature (people don't expect a thin patty burger to be red). But on the other end of our market segment are the people who are looking for big thick hamburger steaks, if you will; and many of them often expect their meat to be rare, or at least pink.

While you might write that off to a case of individual preference and taste, what does a restaurant operator do in North Carolina along Interstate 95 (the major north-south route along the Atlantic seaboard) who is dealing with people traveling to and from their vacations in Florida or other places in the south? They come in and say, "I want a big thick hamburger steak, and bring that to me medium rare, please." Should the table server say, "I'm sorry; I can't do it. I am not allowed to."? Why shouldn't the table server be allowed to respond to that customer request? Either because the company has become very, very scared of what might be in that ground beef, resulting in a company-wide directive that we cook all ground beef to a particular temperature which assures non-survival; or even worse, the local health department has unilaterally decided that every piece of ground beef we serve must be "incinerated." It is safer and nobody gets *E. coli* O157:H7. But it would be interesting to see what sort of carcinogenic residues are created with that kind of over-cooking.

Many Regulatory Agencies

This is a real problem for the food-service industry. And it has become an even bigger problem by virtue of the fact that we do not have the luxury that the meat industry does of responding to only one or a few oversight regulatory agencies.

There are about 3,500 different individual local regulatory agencies across the country that food-service operators have to deal with. Some agencies are still permitting the cooking temperature of 140° Fahrenheit for ground beef. To be fair, most agencies have implemented the 155° F that is currently recommended. Some are saying to cook at 155° F for the eight-second period that came out in the original January 1993

recommendation. More are recommending the 15-second exposure time that is becoming more and more accepted.

However, I have run into some cases where local inspectors have gone into high-volume operations where hamburger sandwiches are prepared in advance of purchase; but said they can't be held in the warming bin for more than 10 minutes or so. I also found inspectors ordering hamburgers condemned because they were not being held above 160° Fahrenheit.

More Help Needed

We need help in this area. What I am seeing at the RMC is that the focus is going away from singular points in the production chain. We had hoped this would happen 18 months ago. There must be multiple overlapping controls throughout the entire food chain, which we're beginning to see happen. This is long overdue and will probably show some very good (but not immediate) results.

The food-service industry recognizes, of course, that as the cooker of the meat, we are somewhat like a domestic consumer in that, first, we can buy only what is available in the market, and second, we have the final responsibility for it. We cook it and it is our responsibility to kill any pathogen that might be present. What we have to ask of our suppliers is that they provide us with products having as low a level of pathogens to destroy as is reasonable.

For our part, we must also caution some of our more zealous members against not only setting unreasonably high cooking temperatures, but also against setting unreasonably high specifications.

Dr. Sischo commented about the inherent fallibility of reliance on testing alone. We have had some members who have tried to establish zero tolerance for pathogens in supplier products. For most, we have fortunately been able to talk them out of it; because as soon as you start specifying that there will be "zero" *salmonella* or "zero" O157:H7, a hot sample will inevitably surface and you are going to be faced with the problem of trying to track it down the food-service line and retrieve it.

We are wholeheartedly in support of the concept and philosophy of HACCP. We think it's the only logical approach to food safety, and we've been teaching it in the restaurant setting for about 10 years now.

In the last 20 years, we have trained almost 500,000 restaurant managers in the general principles of food safety. We update that training about every two years to reflect the ongoing trends in food safety.

Statistics

Let me give you just a couple of statistics. Nobody can come to a conference and make a speech without providing statistics, so I'll have to produce a few.

The food-service industry currently accounts for almost half of the food dollar. About 44% of every dollar spent on food is spent on away-from-home consumption. To be sure, that percentage includes more than commercial restaurants. It also includes institutional and school cafeterias and hospital food service. And keep in mind that the home delivery market is growing by leaps and bounds, and those are also dollars spent outside the home.

There are about 170,000 food-service units in this country that employ just a little over 9,000,000 people. Sales for this year are projected to be about \$160 billion. I am often asked, "How will a certain regulation (or new development) in food safety or technology affect the typical restaurant?" And my stock answer to that question is: "What is a typical restaurant?" How can anybody decide what a typical restaurant is? Consider the variability of the food-service market. It literally goes all the way from the corner hot dog stand to the five-star, white-linen tablecloth restaurant, and includes everything in between!

Future Food Safety

In the area of food safety, our crystal-ball gazing leads us to believe that finally information like Gary Smith presented on the rarity of chemical and drug residues is going to get to the consumer, but it will take a while. The media are reluctant to pass that information along because it's not inflammatory. It's not sexy information; it's not exciting. It's more like reporting "Nobody robbed any banks today." It just doesn't make headlines. But the information is getting out there.

The focus is going to move away from chemical concerns. People are finally going to understand that it's not a major problem to be dealt with; and that we can, in fact, feel good about our regulatory agencies and about our industries in controlling residues. The focus is going to continue to shift towards microbiological safety.

But we are all going to have to figure out what we can do to provide the food that the consumer wants in a form that tastes good and lets the customer feel good. People don't eat just for nutrition; they eat to feel good. This is especially true in the restaurant setting. People do not go to restaurants to calculate their nutritive intake. They go out because it's a celebration or because they didn't have time to cook something at home, or because there's some special reason to go out. When they go out, they need to feel relaxed, they need to feel good and they need to feel satisfied with the way their food is presented to them and with its taste.

To that end, we are going to have to move further and further away from absolutes in food safety. We can no longer count on a zero tolerance and pretend, like one of our members did, that he was going to be able to specify raw-cut chicken parts to be *salmonella*-free. I suggested to him that he might be going in the wrong direction, and eventually he saw the point. Similarly, we can no longer pretend that a single cooking temperature is going to provide absolute safety against all pathogens, for all persons, in all conceivable risk groups. People are going to have to change their focuses and recognize that there are different levels of risks for different foods, different people and different pathogens.

To its credit, the Food and Drug Administration is headed in that direction with its recently revised Food Code 1993, in that it builds some variability into the recommended safety and sanitation requirements that most restaurants will have to follow. It allows for some flexibility, and therefore, some real opportunities for application of HACCP principles.

However, the flip side is that the FDA recommendation also contains what we see as a disturbing trend, which is the growth in warnings and cautions. In succinct language, the FDA recommendation states that you must cook various different foods

at different temperatures. If you don't, you must give clear, written warning to the consumer about the increased risk of consuming those foods raw or otherwise under-cooked.

We see that as very disturbing! It is a concept that says "Welcome to my restaurant, but don't eat this—it might make you sick."

Litigation Problems

From a litigation standpoint, we're very worried about it because if we are expected as an industry to start dividing up the risk groups and matching each risk group against the pathogens, we see ourselves as creating a new hazard for ourselves if we miss a risk group.

I testified in a trial in Denver two months ago that illustrates just how touchy the litigations can become on this issue.

A lady who was three months pregnant ate dinner with a group of friends at a restaurant and she got caught up in the party atmosphere of their celebration. When the table server came to her table, she asked: "This particular dish listed on your menu sounds interesting. Could you describe it for me?" And the table server said, "Why certainly. It's a mixed tartar. Mixed in that it contains venison, antelope and elk."

Now that was perfectly legitimate. These were all commercially-raised products. We're not talking about a "shot" game product. But her next question was: "I'm three months pregnant? What do you think? Is it okay for me to eat this meat?" And the waiter, quite properly, based upon his knowledge and experience responded, "I guess so. I have never heard of anyone getting sick from it."

Well, you can predict the result. She contracted toxoplasmosis, aborted the fetus, and the case still drags on two years later. I saved the kicker for last. It came out in deposition that the lady had been given a pamphlet by her obstetrician that said not to eat rare meat. Now, I have to ask, who is better qualified to educate this particular lady, or indeed any of us, what food might happen to have particular risks? I submit to you that it is the trained medical professional and the public health agencies who should be doing the education—not a preprinted sign on the wall of a restaurant.

With that less than happy thought in mind, let me say that I think we've come a long, long way toward addressing food safety issues and individual risk. Thank you again for letting me help the food-service industry address these issues.