

Costa Fruit & Produce & MRA Stress Food Safety Education In Local Produce Symposium

By MIKE BERGER

More than 100 food service professionals including operators, chefs, and food service personnel met at the Waltham Woods Conference Center on Feb. 26 and were told by produce safety experts that minimizing the risk of food borne illness outbreaks is complicated but much of the responsibility of delivering safe product lies in the hands of operators and staff as well as providers and vendors.

Manny Costa, president of Costa Fruit and Produce, and Peter Christie, president and chief executive officer of the Mass. Restaurant Assn. (MRA) hosted an afternoon food safety symposium on fresh produce with the emphasis on food safety from the growers and farmers, all the way up the food service supply chain to fresh produce delivered on the plates.

Notable speakers besides Mr. Costa and Mr. Christie included Bryan Silbermann, president of the Produce Marketing Assn., Michael Jantschke, director of food safety for ProAct, Andrea Fontaine, lab director for Food Research Laboratories, and Lisa Berger, president of Berger Food Safety Consulting.

Mr. Costa said the purpose of the symposium was to minimize the risk of a food borne illness through industry knowledge and education of best practices and to take an in-depth look at food safety issues related to produce from the farm to the food service operator.

The agenda for the Feb. 26 symposium discussed a range of food safety issues beginning in the growing area, through the supply chain, and right up to the kitchen handling level.

“With the recent food borne outbreaks related to produce and resulting concern over the safety of fresh produce, we felt that a symposium on this topic would be of keen interest to the hospitality community,” said Mr. Christie.

Mr. Jantschke said last fall’s spinach outbreak was a special event in the history of the produce industry. He said the supply side and the growers are now under intense scrutiny.

Although the spinach and leafy green outbreaks led to much national publicity in the fall and early winter of 2006, food borne illnesses in the produce industry have been occurring much more frequently.

Ms. Fontaine said in 1998 there were 44 related produce related outbreaks. In 2005 there were 85 produce related outbreaks and 25 percent were produce related.

She said there were many reasons for this including an increase in produce consumption, increase in global trade, and an increase in surveillance.

She listed the frequency of such produce related problems such as lettuce and leafy greens at 30 percent of product outbreaks, tomatoes, at 17 percent, cantaloupes at 13 percent and herbs at 11 percent.

Ms. Berger, a noted food safety consultant in the New England area, said there are 76 million cases of food borne illnesses every year causing 5,000 to 10,000 deaths every year as well as 25,000 cases of hospitalization. Twelve percent of the food borne illnesses involve produce.

She said that all operators should realize that anyone who handles food from the receiver to the processor, chef, and server should be well educated in food safety. Ms. Berger came out with a food safety sheet for operators which included checklists for personal hygiene, food preparation, temperature requirements, dry storage, cleaning and sanitizing and garbage storage and disposal.

Increasing the risk for food borne illnesses takes into account lack of personal hygiene, cross contamination, improper temperature controls, pest control, and purchasing from unsafe sources.

One area Ms. Berger stressed was the connection between food worker illness and food borne illness. She emphasized that the operator should have a strong illness policy. In one such incident, a food service worker’s illness while on the job cost one company thousands of dollars as the company was forced to shut down for 10 days and incur bad publicity.

She also mentioned that the operator is responsible for calling the board of health if the employee is suspected or diagnosed with a foodborne



Some of the main speakers at the Food Safety Symposium on produce include (left to right). Manny Costa, program organizer and president of Costa Fruit & Produce, Andrea Fontaine, lab director of Food Research Laboratories, Lisa Berger, Food Safety Consulting and Peter Christie, program organizer and president of the Mass. Restaurant Association.

illness, an employee is jaundiced or an employee lives with a person diagnosed with Hepatitis A or salmonella.

Outside An Operator’s Control

Much of the afternoon seminars focused on the entire food service supply chain and how important it is for operators to find out what proper steps their vendors and growers are taking to secure the safety of produce.

Ms. Fontaine played a video piece of an NBC investigation into the poor quality of food safety seen at the Seventh Street Wholesale Produce market in Los Angeles, Calif. The piece contained footage of rats running around shipping crates, improper toilet facilities, no sufficient hand washing facilities and poor temperature controls at this wholesale produce market. The airing of the piece by NBC forced the city health inspector to impose new regulations at the market although produce was still shipped to notable operators such as Johnny Rockets, I-Hop, and a noted sushi restaurant.

Pro-Act

In his talk, Mr. Silbermann stressed the importance of an operator knowing the practices of its distributor. He asked the audience to consider two key questions. “Am I willing to grade the lower price for rigid adherence to minimum standards and how well have I trained food handlers in the produce prep areas?”

Mr. Costa said he and several other independent produce distributors joined forces several years ago to form Pro-Act, which today is a leading distributor of fresh produce to the food service industry.

Besides adding a benefit of streamlining the produce supply chain and offering significant cost benefits to its members, Pro-Act is a watchdog for product quality. Pro-Act distributes fresh produce nationwide from more than 64 distribution centers to food service operators. Food safety and security is a top priority. Pro-Act Distributors are all third party, certified and are required to have food safety and security programs in place.

Some of the steps Mr. Jantschke detailed that Pro-Act looks into at the grower level are irrigation and water systems, temperature controls, livestock and wildlife controls, and pest management, and adjacent land use to the grower.

Mary Jordan, director of agricultural development and Rita Olson, from the Mass. Partnership for Food Safety, talked about the state’s involvement in food safety and the connection to helping local farmers. Ms. Jordan said that there is good interest in organic farming in the state with 160 certified organic growers. Massachusetts ranks 13th in the nation in organic farm sales. Massachusetts also ranks first in New England for direct farm sales and ranks seventh overall in the country for the value of direct farm sales. There are an estimated 6,000 farms in the Bay State.