

You say tomato, I say 'Is it safe?'



By Jo Seltzer, special to the Beacon

"Every time there's a food scare, it's like a billboard advertising local food," says Andy Ayers, owner emeritus of Riddles Penultimate Cafe and Wine Bar in the U. City Loop.

This summer's tomato scare has left many of us wondering what is the safest way to enjoy the fruits of summer? Where is the best place to buy produce? How does produce get contaminated anyway? Once you've brought those bags of fruits and veggies home, what should you do next?

WHY LOCAL PRODUCTS MAY BE SAFER

Mary Fandrey, of the Missouri Department of Health, and Azlin Mustapha, food science professor at the University of Missouri Columbia, agree with Ayers. Fandrey pointed out that no food illness outbreaks have been associated with Missouri-grown produce. Mustapha advises consumers to know where their food comes from.

Farmers markets are the place to find locally grown produce. At these markets you can find heirloom tomatoes, a different variety of peach each week during the season, and beets of many colors. Most of them also sell other foods like honey, bread, organic meat, and even ice cream. Lists of local farmers markets can be found at [AgriMissouri](#) and the [Illinois Department of Agriculture](#).

AT THE MARKET



Restaurants have begun to recognize that customers appreciate the fresh taste of local farm products, and enjoy knowing where their food comes from. Many



A vendor with Silent Oaks Farm at Clayton Farmers Market.

independent restaurants are now printing a daily menu that names the local source of each item where applicable. A recent [Riddles' menu](#) featured "Sauteed Missouri Shiitake Mushrooms - Organically grown on Bald Eagle Farm at the confluence of two of Missouri's most pristine streams, the Jacks Fork & Current Rivers in Shannon County" and "Red Ace Beets from the Thies family farm in north St. Louis County."

Ayers is one of the most enthusiastic boosters of local food in St. Louis restaurants. He knows many of the local farmers and has visited their farms. He believes that there is an "enormous sense of responsibility on the part of the growers who sell to the public." And, of course, they have reputations to consider--a salmonella bacterial outbreak traced to a specific farm could easily put that farm out of business.

THE TOMATO SCARE

Tomatoes contaminated with salmonella have caused about 550 people to be hospitalized in the last few months. Although the FDA has narrowed the source of contamination to Florida or Mexico, the illness has struck consumers all over the country. Most fresh tomatoes purchased in cool weather come from Florida, Mexico or California.

Researchers believe that salmonella bacteria could enter tomato plants through their roots. How do the bacteria get there? Most likely, according to Azlin Mustapha, either untreated manure is present in the field, or the field is irrigated with contaminated water. The federal Centers for Disease Control

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

So how do we relax and enjoy the bounty of our supermarkets? A few simple precautions:

Wash all produce.

Even fruits such as melons should be given a scrub. After

reports one salmonella outbreak traced back to a [pond that irrigated two farms in Virginia](#).

The recent outbreak is a rather rare salmonella strain, saintpaul, so most likely all the tomatoes came from a single contaminated site.

HOW SCARED SHOULD WE BE?

The recent outbreak is a major public health calamity. But most tomatoes are safe.

The CDC reports that over 5 billion pounds of raw tomatoes are eaten every year in the United States. In the years from 1990 to 2007, about 2000 total cases of salmonella poisoning from tomatoes were confirmed. The CDC estimates the real numbers as closer to 80,000 during those 17 years because most cases are not reported or confirmed.

At an average of three tomatoes to a pound, 5 billion pounds is 15 billion tomatoes. Over 17 years, 255 billion tomatoes may have been responsible for at most 80,000 illnesses. That is, approximately one in three million tomatoes (.00003%) of tomatoes may have been contaminated when shipped. Very likely, many of these one in three million tomatoes were contaminated during shipping or storage, and could have been washed clean.

all, before it was picked that cantaloupe lived on the ground. Any harmful bacteria clinging to its surface can be transferred to the flesh during cutting. Those commercial produce washes have not been shown effective, so don't waste your money.

Although not recommended by the FDA, some people dip produce in a 10% Chlorox solution. However, if it is not rinsed, and repeatedly rinsed again, the food will taste like chlorine.

Try not to buy fruits and vegetables that are bruised or damaged.

Cut away bruises and damaged areas and do not eat them. Bacteria can enter wounds.

Refrigerate raw fruits and veggies that have been cut or peeled.

All produce should be thoroughly washed under clear running water. Mustapha says she scrubs any fruit or vegetable that will be eaten raw with a paper towel or at least with her fingers. Of course, thorough cooking will kill bacteria.

Ayers also says that the consumer contributes to the safety of the produce bought at venues like farmers' markets. If the food looks earthy, wash it until it is clean.

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Close Window