

Safety

First

*Foodservice operators step up their game to keep
in line with best food-safety practices*

By Brianne Binelli // Photography Margaret Mulligan

TURN PAGE FOR STORY



The stories are everywhere: in Newmarket, Ont., a Tim Hortons' employee tests positive for Hepatitis A; in the wake of a salmonella outbreak, peanut butter sales reportedly drop by 25 per cent; dozens of pistachio products are recalled while a flurry of controversy erupts after two reports on foodborne illness are released in Ontario days before a parliamentary committee in Ottawa addresses the same issue.

At first glance it sounds overwhelming, but to put it into perspective, the Public Health Agency of Canada reports an estimated 10 million of the nation's 33 million citizens contract food-related illnesses each year, and of those 10 million, most cause only *minor* illness. And although it seems like there are daily recalls and constant food safety breaches being reported by the media, the operators, suppliers and distributors in the foodservice industry are upping the ante to guard against outbreaks.

Maple Leaf Foods Inc., for example, revamped its food safety plan after a listeria epidemic last summer — which originated from meat slicers in its Bartor Road plant in North York, Ont. — led to the death of at least 20 people. The subsequent recall was one of the largest in Canadian history, cost the company millions of dollars and saw its share prices tumble. "You really need to be hyper-vigilant," says Iain Stewart, senior vice-president of Food Safety & Transformation at Maple Leaf. "We know so much more about listeria today than we did before this outbreak, including how it can move through a facility, how pervasive it is within that facility, the aggressiveness of your protocols and how on top of these problem-solving areas you need to be."

Maple Leaf president and CEO, Michael McCain, echoed that sentiment when he testified at parliamentary hearings on food safety, alongside representatives from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), in late April. "Had we known then what we know now; had we done then what we do now, we might have saved 21 lives," he was reported as saying in a *National Post* story on the hearings. "We're determined to make a terrible wrong, right. That's our obligation to those who died and their families."

Some opposition MPs lauded McCain for meeting the crisis head-on and not shying away from the media firestorm surrounding the outbreak. (Incidentally, McCain was named 2008 CEO of the year by the Canadian Press for his role in managing the fallout from the crisis.) And they questioned the role of the CFIA and whether the government should shoulder more responsibility.

The *National Post* also reported that McCain, in a speech to business executives on the day of the hearings, admitted Canada's foodservice industry needs to take food safety more seriously. "The problems don't relate only to meat, but to cheese, seafood, vegetables

and nuts as well... This industry has to raise its game. It has to invest more in food safety, and it has to improve its record of delivering safe food to consumers." McCain also stated that more effective inspection and testing capabilities were needed at the CFIA. "Canadian food regulation does need to get tougher," he said, "with tough accountability for those not meeting regulatory requirements."

To that end, Maple Leaf executives spent six months and millions of dollars testing its facilities and implementing new procedures. For instance, Maple Leaf has introduced more comprehensive sanitation; they're pushing more aggressive sampling, testing and data analysis; and they have more than 200 plant standard operating procedures.

Things have changed outside the plant, too. In January, the company introduced Dr. Randall Huffman as its first Chief Food Safety Officer and, more recently, an external company blog was launched, providing updates on its food safety program and discussions about listeria management. Still, testing remains a top priority. "Every morning, we have a call that will have the senior leadership of our company [reviewing] the previous day's results. We've been doing that for eight months," Stewart says.

Maple Leaf isn't alone in its desire to fine-tune food safety protocols. Compass Group Canada wrote its new food-safety program a few years ago and began implementing what it says are the strictest standards in North America to its operations across the country. Of course, in what's now a reoccurring industry standard, practices are tweaked daily. Mike Byerley, the company's director of Quality Assurance, checks for recalls 365 days of the year, making the appropriate changes when needed. A good example is the action Compass took during the spinach recall a few years back. "The U.S. FDA announced on the Thursday night that there was an issue with the spinach. On the Friday morning, we put out the bulletin to our operations across North America... to stop using the [specified] spinach," says Byerley of the protocol that saw the removal of tainted food from company kitchens three days before the CFIA finished testing and issued an official recall.

Stories like this reinforce the importance of practising constant care and training across the board. "We train our purchasing people, our marketing people, our sales people, and

Tough Call

Nobody can predict the future, but operators should be taking the time to anticipate forthcoming issues surrounding food safety. Mike Byerley, director of Quality Assurance at Compass Group Canada, and his team are already anticipating the hygienic impact of one popular green initiative — the use of refillable mugs. "One of the things we're really working on is how do we deal with that practice in regard to the cross-contamination issue?" he says of the challenges of safely refilling a dirty mug without spreading bacteria. "Are we responsible to wash that cup out and give it back? And if we don't wash it out and the person gets sick because of the milk that was in the coffee cup from six hours ago, who's responsible for that foodborne illness?"


we also train our auditing people,” explains Byerley. “Everybody that goes into any one of our operations gets the food safety course so that there’s another pair of eyes that can advise us if there’s something going on that we need to correct.”

Many operators may have difficulty fitting company-wide training into their budgets, especially during a recession, but it’s vital that more than just part-time workers learn about food safety. “If you don’t get to that owner/operator, or whoever is charged with the responsibilities of managing the business, it falls on deaf ears,” explains Steve Burns, president of the Surety Food Safety Group Inc., a food-safety provider that partners with manufacturers, distributors, foodservice markets and retailers.

Meanwhile, there are basic steps to take to maintain a healthy, clean, food-prep environment. “If a restaurateur’s employees are sick, they really shouldn’t be serving food. That’s something they can control,” insists Dr. Douglas Powell, an associate professor of Food Safety at Kansas State University, prominent food safety blogger and critic. It sounds simple enough, but aside from enforcing handwashing, employers also have to convince employees to stay home when they’re sick, an issue that recently came to light in a Toronto report calling on the Ontario government to consider compensating food handlers who are too sick with “gastrointestinal illness” to come to work.

Unfortunately, that’s easier said than done. “Typically, if a worker doesn’t come to work, they are not compensated,” says Compass’s Byerley. “But if we were to build in a compensation program for people that were sick, prices, of course, would have to go up accordingly, which the public wouldn’t like,” he explains, adding that Compass just revisited its policy prior to the recent debate on the issue.

Industry insiders are also clashing over new CFIA listeria regulations in federally regulated, ready-to-eat meat processing plants that include: mandatory environmental testing, mandatory immediate reporting of positive findings of listeria and additional environmental



DID YOU KNOW?

Nobody said running a restaurant was easy. Case-in-point: Macleans.ca reports that McDonald’s Canada was directed to pay approximately \$50,000 – on top of two years of disability payments – to a former employee who alleged it was an infringement on her rights to be forced to constantly wash her sore, aching hands, which were plagued with a skin condition.

and end-product testing for listeria. In a letter to the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association, a Canadian Meat Council representative applauded the changes but voiced concern about the costs associated with it, literally and figuratively.

Even though Maple Leaf protocols were already closely aligned with the new regulations, Stewart suspects industry implementation will be tough. “It’s really going to increase the food-safety nature of Canadian products; however, it could be a little bumpy out of the gate as everybody now has to have an environmental-monitoring program, which wasn’t necessarily the case before the recall,” he says.

There may be simple solutions to the problem for some operators. “We’re starting to remove slicers from our operations and going to the pre-sliced and pre-packaged meat,” explains Compass’s Byerley. “Not

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only does it make food safer, but it also gives us better control of our labour and our wastage, so it’s a win-win all around.”

In any case, the new listeria requirements are just one part of a long list of CFIA initiatives geared towards increasing product safety. “The CFIA has regulatory responsibility for continuous improvement. With this in mind, the CFIA has examined the systems in place to mitigate food-safety risks,” explains a CFIA rep. “The CFIA is dedicated to the task of enhancing Canada’s food-safety system and is implementing a range of initiatives.” The handful of changes include: updating the Meat Hygiene Manual of Procedures, convening an academic advisory panel to provide advice on a variety of topics and enhancing laboratory procedures.

Kansas State’s Powell may be happy to hear about the revised lab procedures, but overall, the Canadian ex-pat isn’t satisfied with our government’s system. “They need to delineate authority and how to do an outbreak investigation, they need to have much better use of labs and they need to be more transparent,” says the pundit. “All of our agencies, not just Health Canada, don’t really need any more reports. They should just do it.”

Maple Leaf’s Stewart worries there needs to be a common thread between federal and provincial standards. Similarly, Surety’s Burns is concerned about globalization and the gap in common standards across countless jurisdictions. It’s a point raised with the release of Ontario’s 2008 listeriosis outbreak report. “Cross-jurisdictional outbreaks, such as the listeriosis outbreak last year, are likely to become more common because of the trend to large-scale food manufacturing and processing,” says Dr. David Williams, Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health, who authored the report. “While Ontario’s public health system worked well in detecting the [2008 listeriosis] outbreak, we need to have better clarity of roles and coordination to more effectively manage future outbreaks.”

Increasingly, restaurateurs are turning to

local farmers and producers for their meat, and one of the reasons has to do with caution over the quality and safety of product from large-scale food processors. There’s never been a better time for these companies to revisit their food safety protocols, and restaurant operators should do the same, because government standards aside, they also need to take responsibility for their hand in the matter.

“Just because you’ve been told you’re best in class and because you believe your program is best in class, doesn’t mean it will be enough,” reiterates Stewart. “You need to be constantly improving your protocols and challenging them on a regular basis.” That means everything from employing good hygiene (washing your hands, removing jewellery and donning a hairnet, for example), maintaining a safe environment to prepare and serve food and enforcing correct temperature controls. Many companies also assess hazards as a means of prevention, using the well-recognized Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) system, an especially important topic of conversation when choosing a supplier.

It may require a great deal of investment in the short term, but the long-term benefits will improve brand recognition, and it may even cut costs as well. “The companies that have a disciplined food-safety system can enhance their operating income by up to two per cent,” says Surety’s Burns. “That’s huge for a small investment and, at the same time, [it’s] building brand protection.” But don’t confuse building brand protection with brand competition. “Safety shouldn’t be a competitive issue, because we’re all sharing the same information,” advises Stewart.

It’s clear preventing the spread of Hepatitis A, salmonella, listeriosis, botulism and countless other foodborne illnesses is attributed to ongoing vigilance. But according to experts like Byerley, it’s something the industry can manage. “If the training and support comes right from the top; if it becomes a matter of culture and employees live and breathe it, then things will be a lot easier.” ●