



MAKING LUNCH: Isaias Moran takes lettuce from a cooled bin and makes a salad during lunch at El Pollo Loco in Irvine.

MARK RIGHTMIRE, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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Tips for consumers

When selecting fresh cut produce, such as bagged mixed salad greens, choose only those items that are refrigerated or surrounded by ice.

At home, keep fresh fruits and vegetables separated from meat, poultry and seafood products.

All produce that is purchased pre-cut or peeled should be refrigerated within two hours to maintain both quality and safety. Keep refrigerator set at 40° F or below.

Unpackaged fruits and vegetables and bagged produce not marked "pre-washed" should be thoroughly washed before eating. This includes organic produce. Don't wash fruits and vegetables with soap, detergent or commercial produce washes.

Source: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Good Agricultural Practices

Q: What are Good Agricultural Practices, or GAPs?

A: A set of voluntary Food and Drug Administration guidelines that growers and food suppliers are expected to follow to keep food safe. The standards cover everything from sanitation of restrooms in fields to worker hygiene to monitoring of adjacent land use.

Q: Is it enforced?

A: No. It's a guideline, and not a legally enforceable document.

Q: What are these outbreaks costing the produce industry?

A: Millions. The financial toll stemming from the spinach outbreak alone is estimated to be \$74 million. That number will likely grow as wary consumers continue to avoid buying fresh-cut vegetables. For example, Boskovich Farms in Oxnard, whose No. 2 crop is spinach, said it is

still reeling from the food scare even though Ventura County farms were not linked to the contamination.

"Spinach sales are slowly increasing, but are still approximately 25 to 30 percent below normal," Boskovich spokeswoman Lindsay Martínez said in February.

Q: Did Taco Bell change its practices after the food scare in its restaurants?

A: Yes. The Irvine chain replaced its East Coast lettuce supplier, Ready Pac. Taco Bell said it still uses Ready Pac in other regions. It also began testing lettuce prior to harvest, a procedure that will give the chain more lead time to pull any contaminated product before it is served in restaurants.

Q: Are others in the food industry beefing up produce safety procedures?

A: Yes. Costco, for example, will soon require its vendors to lab test "ready to eat" produce. That policy is already in place for bagged spinach, which the company didn't allow back in stores until January. In May, Jack in the Box expects to have similar testing protocols in place.

Also, the Western Growers Association in Irvine will begin April 1 a self-regulation program for leafy green vegetables grown in California. Those in compliance with the uniform standards will have produce certified with a safety seal.

Q: How will I know if my bagged salad is certified?

A: The association hasn't decided if the safety seal will be visible by the consumer. However, growers who don't follow the uniform standards will likely be shunned by clients such as grocers.

That's the "ultimate marketplace enforcement," said Peter Larkin, president of California Grocers Association, which represents 7,000 supermarkets in the state, including major chains in Southern California.

Q: What about produce outside of California?

A: Nothing is in place yet. Ultimately, Larkin said the Western Growers Association's leafy green program "ought to be a framework for all produce, regardless of where it is grown."
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Produce safety procedures that work

The Register takes a peek at El Pollo Loco's produce safety procedures, praised by some as being among the toughest in the fast-food industry.

By NANCY LUNA
The Orange County Register

This is the second of three articles about the fresh-cut produce industry. [CLICK HERE](#) to read the first installment.

At a recent investor conference, an executive tied to Irvine-based **Taco Bell** described the company's brush with E. coli as an "opportunity" to develop better farm safety procedures.

"Opportunity" may not be the word of choice for 71 of its customers who last year got sick on Taco Bell food.

Still, the idea has merit. The widely publicized E. coli poisonings connected to Taco Bell, along with recent high-profile outbreaks connected to other companies, is prompting grocers and restaurants to re-examine their food safety procedures.

"The best way to avoid the carnage of a train wreck is to do everything you can do make sure the wreck never happens," said Steve Lash, director of supply chain management for **El Pollo Loco** in Irvine.

To help shed light on food safety, El Pollo Loco let The Orange County Register observe its produce safety procedures – a system of random audits, lab tests and field inspections conducted from field- to-fork. Food safety experts say the chain's system is among the toughest in the industry.

"They're proactive in every way, from the plant facility all the way down to the field," said Brian Mansfield of **Primus Labs**, a food safety auditor whose roster of clients include El Pollo Loco, Albertsons, Safeway and Carl's Jr.

Out to the fields

At El Pollo Loco, food safety testing starts at the farm.

The chain insists that its produce suppliers, about 10 companies, conduct about a half-dozen lab tests before the raw vegetables are packed and shipped to restaurants. Such downstream protocols have been standard practice at the company for eight years.

Since expanding from Mexico to United States in 1980, El Pollo Loco says it can't recall a produce related outbreak tied to its restaurants. Produce accounts for about 56 percent of the chain's menu.

To protect customers, and its reputation, El Pollo Loco doesn't rely solely on safety reports. Instead, chain leaders follow a seeing is believing approach.

"We'll actually roll up our pants and go out to the fields," said Yvonne Mackay, El Pollo Loco's quality assurance director.

Mackay's three managers, as well as third party auditors hired by the chain, probe farms and produce plants several times a year. Over the past three years, eleven different produce fields have been thoroughly inspected, Mackay said.

In the field, El Pollo Loco reviews everything from worker hygiene to field restroom sanitation to adjacent land use. The latter check is considered critical, as feces from nearby animal farms

can contaminate the ground, as was the case last year when more than 200 people became ill from E. coli tainted spinach.

By trudging through fields and packing plants, Mackay said her company is "plugged into every point of the supply chain."

In just 10 minutes

From the farm, checks move to the chain's independent produce suppliers, inspected twice yearly.

"We're not known for being easy," said supply chain director Lash.

One of those suppliers is **Los Angeles Salad**, a City of Industry plant that cranks out 500,000 pounds of produce a week. Some of its products include Trader Joe's brand bagged butternut squash and the chopped iceberg and romaine lettuce served in El Pollo Loco salads.

During a recent tour of the 25,000-square foot plant, the Register observed the journey of a bin of romaine lettuce – which lasts about the same amount of time most people take a shower.

Only, this 10-minute cleansing is much more involved.

When lettuce arrives at the plant, workers pluck pieces from different 800-pound bins to get an 8-ounce composite sample. Each sample is sealed in a sterile container and sent to an in-house lab for analysis.

Random samples are taken at least two times as the lettuce makes its way through the plant.

The second sampling occurs when employees – wearing shower caps, lab coats and sterile gloves – inspect the lettuce as it rumbles on a conveyor belt. The lettuce then is chopped and bathed in a chilled chlorination wash. Even the wash itself is tested every 30 minutes to ensure it meets industry standards, said Robert Maldonado, Los Angeles Salad's quality assurance manager.

After the washing, lettuce is spun dry and placed into a 2 1/2 –pound vacuum sealed bag – at which point more samples are taken for testing. In the lab, incubation tests can detect pathogens after nine hours – enough time to trace and pull any bad batch before it hits El Pollo Loco restaurants 48 hours later.

Fast food rivals describe such testing as gold standard.

This is "what the future will be like," said David Theno, senior vice president of quality and logistics at San Diego-based **Jack in the Box**.

Altering the industry

In the 1990s, Theno instituted pathogen testing of "finished" burger patties at Jack in the Box in the wake of E. coli deaths that rocked the beef industry. Back then, restaurant chains pushed their meat suppliers to increase lab analysis as a way to reduce E. coli illnesses.

More oversight worked. Overall, E. coli cases have fallen since the mid-1990s, coinciding with the tighter scrutiny of the beef and poultry sector, federal health officials say.

Theno said similar market pressures are already altering retail and food service industries when it comes to produce.

Jack in the Box, for example, has asked its three produce suppliers to start conducting frequent pathogen testing throughout their packing process. That program is supposed to start in May.

Grocers are paying attention too. In late January, warehouse giant **Costco** said it would accept bagged spinach only from vendors that lab test produce for pathogens. Later this year, the chain will institute those same standards for other ready to eat vegetables, said Craig Wilson, Costco's assistant vice president of food safety and quality assurance.

"It's such a big undertaking. You just don't throw the switch overnight," Wilson said.

For suppliers and restaurants, cleanliness isn't cheap.

Los Angeles Salad, which generates annual sales of \$65 million, will spend \$1 million on food safety this year. That buys everything from hand sanitizer to a \$30 culture test. El Pollo Loco's Mackay said the company's spending on food safety "runs deep" throughout the organization, but added it is too difficult to "accurately calculate" a dollar figure.

National food safety expert Michael Doyle commended any grower, packer or retailer that engages in frequent lab testing, which is not legally required.

Doyle, director of the Center for Food Safety at the University of Georgia, is working to improve produce safety standards at Taco Bell and **Earthbound Farm**, a Carmel Valley grower whose bagged spinach was one of several brands connected to last year's spinach outbreak.

Under Doyle's direction, Earthbound has begun testing pathogens at various points in its packing process, similar to Los Angeles Salad. Taco Bell, the nation's largest Mexican fast food chain, is still trying to "motivate" its produce suppliers to do that same level of testing, Doyle said.

But, so far, it's been a tough sell. "There (are) a lot of processors that don't want to do this."

At El Pollo Loco, executives Lash and Mackay say they take pride in the chain's field to fork safety procedures. However, they won't be lulled into thinking they've reached perfection.

"We all worry about incidents like (Taco Bell) because it affects the entire industry," Lash said. "When one of us had a bad day, we all do."

Tomorrow: An inventor from Orange claims he can zap pesky pathogens.

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