

## OUR VIEW

Wednesday, Feb. 04, 2009

# Ensuring the safety of what we eat

If you had breakfast this morning, stop for a moment and think about what you ate. Where was the cereal grown? How? Were pesticides applied? What kind? Was the grain genetically altered?

Was the cow that provided the milk juiced on synthetic growth hormones? Does the hen that laid your eggs ever see the light of day? Was your bacon irradiated? Preserved with nitrites? How was the pig — if it was real bacon — raised?

Now, what's for lunch? How about a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a spinach and mushroom salad?

Peanut butter is out for at least 550 reasons — that's how many people have been sickened by salmonella-laced food products traced to a Georgia processing plant. And mushrooms may be hard to find after a southeastern Pennsylvania producer recalled theirs because they may be contaminated with a bacterial pathogen that can be fatal to people — infants and the elderly, for example — who have weakened immune systems. Still hungry?

Just three generations off the farm, most Americans have no idea where their food comes from or what is in it. And relying on the government, specifically the Food and Drug Administration, for protection has proved to be a disaster.

“The FDA is supposed to be a watchdog for consumers, and for too long, this agency has been coming up short,” Jean Halloran, director of Food Policy Initiatives for the Consumers Union, said. How short?

“I think that the FDA has not been able to catch some of these things as quickly as I expect them to,” President Obama said in an interview aired Monday on NBC's “Today” show, noting that his 7-year-old daughter, Sasha, eats peanut butter for lunch as often as three times a week.

Food-safety activists have been calling for a beefed-up FDA, asking Congress to give the agency power to order food recalls, require annual inspections of food-processing facilities and require processors to disclose when their own tests find tainted products.

That will take money, of course, and probably a split from the “drug” side of the rather tame and toothless watchdog.

Others have advocated the creation of a Cabinet-level Department of Food.

In the meantime, there is something you can do to help ensure the quality and safety of food you eat— and you've no doubt read it here several times previously: Buy fresh, buy local.

Knowing your farmer and how he or she grows vegetables and raises animals provides more peace of mind than wondering which items and brands are among the more than 800 products that have been recalled — belatedly — since the most recent salmonella outbreak at the Georgia peanut-processing plant.

Tuesday's opinion page featured a column written by Brian Snyder, executive director of the Millheim-based Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, and Scott Exo, who holds a similar position with the nonprofit, sustainability-certification organization Food Alliance, of Portland, Ore. In it, they suggested a total redesign of our food system, so that:

Our food and all its ingredients would carry into the marketplace the identities and reputations of those who produced it; the companies that bring us our food would be transparent about their management standards, practices and outcomes; and there would be accountability and systems to assure buyers that the claims made about particular food products are true. Nothing hard to swallow there.

That proposal undoubtedly will be among the many topics discussed at the PASA-sponsored Farming for the Future conference, Thursday through Saturday at The Penn Stater Conference Center Hotel — along with peanut butter, mushrooms and where the items on the dinner menu came from.

Eat safely. And get to know your farmer in the process.

## **IF YOU GO**

**What:** Farming for the Future Conference: The Worldwide Search for Food Sovereignty — Finding Your Foodshed

**When:** Thursday through Saturday

**Where:** The Penn Stater Conference Center Hotel

**Sponsor:** Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture

**Information:** [www.pasafarming.org](http://www.pasafarming.org)