



Back to Basics

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Ladybug salad

My wife and I recently took my 80-year-old mother out to lunch. It wasn't a fancy establishment, simply a family-style restaurant that serves good home-style cooking and the kind she grew up on. We all ordered our meals with salads on the side.

Not long into the meal my mom asked, "What is that crawling out of my salad?" I quickly identified the uninvited guest as a ladybug minus one wing.

The good wing was drenched in salad dressing. Laughing, while not fazed a bit, my mom, with her fork, moved the bug off her plate and continued to eat her salad.

Knowing that other patrons may not take the uninvited guest in their salad news well, we signaled the waiter. As an FYI we showed him the uninvited guest. The waiter, very apologetic and expecting a scene from us, quickly snapped the plate up from my mom. I can tell you from experience you do not want to take a good plate of food away from a Torell!

My mom said, "Where are you going

with my salad? I'm not done with that!" The waiter left and soon the manager showed up at our table. "I understand you found a bug in your salad and you are not upset at all?" Wishing all patrons were as understanding as my mom, the manager explained that even though we did not order organic salads, the lettuce used was what they purchased for their organic orders.

The worm and the apple

Organic. This explains the ladybug in the lettuce. During the growing phase of organic vegetables, ladybugs are used as natural predators for aphids and other detrimental insects. The presence of the ladybug shows that the lettuce was actually grown under natural conditions with no pesticides used. Do you think the green-generation customers of this restaurant will see it that way? Being raised during the Depression as my mom was made her tough. The tough times her generation endured educated them about where food comes from and how

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to appreciate a salad, ladybug and all. As my deceased dad often pointed out to me, "The only thing worse than finding a worm in your apple is finding half a worm."

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Some consumers are willing to pay for these products. They feel by doing so they are eating healthier — doing their part for the environment — and it makes them feel good. They do not want the ladybug in their salad or the worm in their apple, yet, at the same time, they want their product raised without pesticides.

Perception vs. science

Food safety, as it should be, is at the top of the list for consumers and politicians. Unfortunately, just because something is supposedly raised as organic, hormone-free, natural, pesticide- or herbicide-free, does not ensure a safe product. Actually, it does not even add to the safety of these foods. Take a look at a few of the food safety issues that have arisen over the past several years that have had a devastating effect to those industries.

There was the "great apple Alar scare of 1989," a conservative tale that has been endlessly recycled by the mass media about the dangers of chemicals in agriculture. In this case, the media brought out unfounded health issues associated with eating apples treated with Alar.

Alar is a chemical that makes apples ripen longer before falling off the tree.

This brought on government regulatory excess and media irresponsibility. The word Alar has become a near-universal term for an irrational health scare stemming from "junk science." The Alar scare, false as it was, bankrupted several apple farmers.

More recently, take swine flu. Recognition that this new strain of flu is a combination of swine, avian and human components has led most officials to

begin using the name influenza A (H1N1). Nevertheless, pork markets have been hit by consumer fears and some trade bans, despite the fact that there is no risk of flu from

pork consumption. In most cases, the effects are driven by lack of information, sometimes by misinformation, and occasionally by the irresistible

temptation to use the situation for political ends. It highlights the never-ending need for education to make sure consumers and policymakers use science rather than emotion to make decisions. Food safety issues are not good for any segment of agriculture. The beef industry has been through this same wringer with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).

Growing at alarming rates are the grass-fed, natural, organic and no-added-hormone markets. Direct and name-brand marketing of these products is building momentum and will probably continue to do so. This tells me that perception in the eye of some consumers takes priority to science and common sense. I personally share my mom's opinion, "Where are you going with my food, ladybug and all?"

As always, if you would like to discuss this article or simply would like to talk cows, do not hesitate to contact me at 775-738-1721 or torellr@unce.unr.edu.

