

Poorly Written Food Safety Plan Threatens Small Local Farmers

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A simple head of treviso, resplendent with its dramatic patterns of purple and white, dressed for salad, can make a culinary soul happier than just about anything one could eat. This is a treasured, unusual and flavorful green. It's best to buy the whole head, as it loses its distinctive character in a pre-cut bagged mix.

In what would be a drastic reversal of culinary trend, this flavor may soon disappear, along with locally grown, seasonal greens like lolla rossa, curly endive and arugula - and just when Americans are finally rediscovering how good they are for our farmers, our health and our culinary inspiration. Let the alarm bell ring, because we are on the edge of losing these wonderful varieties brought to our plates by the small and determined family farmer.

It's the latest threat to our palates by big agricultural interests. The Western Growers Association (www.wga.com) recently implemented a uniform set of growing standards called the Leafy Green Marketing Agreement in its effort to recover from the spinach *E. coli* outbreak of 2006.

Sounds sensible, doesn't it? Protecting our salads from contamination?

But the devil is in the details. If the new farming production standards become mandatory for all leafy green growers, small farmers who worked for decades to bring back of pre-cut, bagged leafy greens, to keep that product safe. But it should not apply to the small farmers who sell loose greens directly to farmers markets, chefs and companies like Bon Appetit Management Company, who prefer to buy from small local producers. These small farmers have no connection to the processed industry and are least likely to be the cause of any major outbreak of food contamination.

The Community Alliance with Family Farmers recommends that practical and environmentally sound food safety guidelines for all farms, including those that grow leafy greens, be developed. Guidelines are being drafted with assistance from the University of California-Davis. These alternative guidelines are to be used by small and traditional family farms to ensure feasible standards for safety. So you can eat your salad greens from small farms with confidence.

The Community Alliance (www.caff.org) recently analyzed data provided by the FDA that leaves small farms clean of blame. It shows that since 1999, 98.5 percent of *E. coli* outbreaks in leafy greens in California have been traced to processed bagged salad. These products have a higher potential for contamination because of centralized washing and packaging of mixed produce from different farms. Pre-cut salads are then placed into sealed plastic bags, which may create an ideal environment for bacterial growth. The Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement should focus on these higher-risk producers and not the traditional sell-direct farmers who grow fresh greens.

Bon Appetit Management Company is against these growing standards. As with all people who love diversity of the palate, we are concerned about the impact on flavor and sustainable farming practices. We purchase over \$55 million worth of local products annually for our 400 cafes in 28 states, working extremely hard to establish, encourage and increase the connections among our chefs, local farmers and the people we feed. How much additional effort will it take for us to keep these local, seasonal flavors on the plates in our cafes?

This week, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., withdrew a proposed amendment to the Farm Bill that would have made these standards national. This was a narrow escape from a dire threat to greens lovers coast-to-coast. Still, the threat remains.

Raise a fork during the public comment period, and let the USDA know you are against a federal Marketing Agreement. The public comment period closes on Dec. 3. Tell the Department of Agriculture that you want that treviso from small local farmers on your table, that the Leafy Green Marketing Agreement hurts the farmers you want to buy from, and that it should not be on the menu.

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