

EAT BEAT

by Martha Wagner



Food Irradiation Symbol

Irradiation Issue Heats Up

Local produce season here, but cloud hangs over food industry

First the good news. Lane County Farmers' Market is open for business again, with fresh fare ranging from cut flowers to shiitake mushrooms. The first local strawberries are expected by mid-May. The warm, dry weather means earlier than usual berries and other crops.

Market manager John Graham anticipates a good season. Last year's sales doubled the previous year's. The market consignment booth—look for the tent—has a large supply of bedding plants and vegetable starts, plus flowers, some vegies, and breads from The Bread Stop.

Are Lane County palates ready for fresh shiitake mushrooms? That's the big question for John Donoghue of Corvallis, who grows exotic mushrooms mostly for out-of-state markets. The shiitake (*shee-TAH-kay*) is prized for its rich flavor and used extensively in Japanese and Chinese cooking.

The Market is open every Saturday, across the street from Saturday Market, at Eighth and Oak Streets.

While locally-grown food and home gardens give food lovers much to look forward to at this time of year, the bad news is that the safety of our food supply is seriously threatened by technology more worrisome than pesticides.

Food irradiation is not a new technology, but its use on a wide variety of foods was only approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in April 1986. To date, few domestically-grown foods have been irradiated, although it's been legal to irradiate wheat, white potatoes and fresh pork since before 1986. Imported tropical fruits with the required irradiation symbol label have been sold in several parts of the country.

How does irradiation work? Food is irradiated by exposure to gamma rays from radioactive cobalt-60 or cesium-137 in a lead-shielded concrete chamber. Dosage is controlled by the amount of time the food is exposed. No radioactive residue remains on the food.

The existing handful of irradiation facilities may grow to 1000 to handle increased volume. (The Port of Pasco, near Hanford in Washington State, has applied for federal funds to build an irradiator.)

In theory, irradiation can replace post-harvest pesticides, inhibit sprouting of potatoes and onions, delay ripening of fresh fruits and vegetables, destroy some bacteria responsible for food poisoning, and even sterilize food, as has been done for NASA space flights. By extending food shelf life, it may help to alleviate world food shortages and hunger, proponents say.

Opponents of irradiation say the process is not nearly as effective as its supporters maintain, and that irradiated food may contain chemicals capable of causing cancer or birth defects.

Nutrition Compromised

The *New York Times* has reported that irradiation strips away the color of most green vegetables, and a University of California (Davis) study has found that irradiation can destroy Vitamin C and cause color, flavor and texture change in oranges and strawberries. A growing number of food producers are taking a wait-and-see approach to irradiation, concerned about both public opinion and costs.

According to a detailed report in *Nutrition Action Healthletter* (November 1986), irradiation cannot substitute for the variety of pesticides applied to crops while they're still growing. Most of the report focuses on questions of food safety, questions which, it said, the FDA largely chose to ignore when considering widening the scope of foods allowed to be irradiated.

The report says the government claimed changes in irradiated foods are so small that the foods can be presumed safe without testing on animals. Yet, the government chose to support the safety argument with results of five animal feeding studies, picked out of hundreds of studies labeled by the irradiation industry as "flawed." These studies have suggested links between food irradiation and chromosomal changes, anemia, thyroid disease, kidney disease, impaired reproduction and increased mortality.

Nutrition Action and, more recently, the newsletter of the University of California's (Berkeley) School of Public Health have expressed concern about the way irradiation alters foods to produce unique radiolytic products (URPs), chemicals never found in unirradiated food. Scientists have not studied all of these compounds, but several have been associated with pre-cancerous conditions in laboratory animals fed irradiated foods.

Environmental Risks

There's also a major question of environmental safety. The radioactive materials used to irradiate food, waste products of the nuclear industry, would be crisscrossing the country to supply irradiator facilities. And, according to *American Health* (March 1987), the existing irradiation industry has a dismal safety record. Two independently operated facilities in New Jersey have been charged with and found guilty of numerous violations, ranging from failure to report radioactive spills to endangerment of workers and illegal irradiation of cocoa, a food not approved for irradiation.

If none of this sounds too reassuring, well, that's the point. Public opinion on the issue matters a great deal. Although the Oregon House of Representatives recently rejected a bill requiring shelf labeling of irradiated food products, important bills restricting food irradiation practices have been introduced in the U.S. House and Senate. Fourth District Rep. Peter DeFazio is a co-sponsor of HR 956.

The proposed bills would prohibit irradiation of pork and produce; prohibit further expansion of food irradiation; require independent safety studies by the National Academy of Sciences, including health and environmental risks; and tighten labeling requirements for foods that may still be irradiated, including herbs, spices, potatoes and grains.

They would also require labeling for irradiated foods sold in supermarkets or in restaurants; ban the export or import of irradiated foods not approved for U.S. consumption; and establish certain record-keeping requirements for the food irradiation industry.

While these measures are in committee, one irradiation company is seeking government approval to irradiate fish, shellfish, and poultry, and the Department of Agriculture is considering irradiation as a solution for poultry processing contamination.

Concerned? Here's what you can do:

- Urge support of HR 956 and S 461 by writing to Rep. Peter DeFazio, Longworth House Office Bldg., Washington, DC 20515; Sen. Mark Hatfield, Hart Senate Office Bldg., Washington, DC 21510; Sen. Robert Packwood, Russell Senate Office Bldg., Washington, DC 21510.

- Support citizens' groups concerned with food irradiation. Contact Consumers United for Food Safety, PO Box 22928, Seattle, WA 98122, or National Coalition to Stop Food Irradiation, Box 59-0488, San Francisco, CA 94159.

Three locally-owned food businesses, neighbors at the corner of 24th and Hilyard Streets, will host a combined birthday party Saturday, May 16, from 10 am to 6 pm.

The party is in honor of Sundance Natural Foods' 16th year, Humble Bagel's 10th year, and Oregon Homegrown Meats' 5th year. Sundance was one of the area's first natural food stores. Humble Bagel was Eugene's first bagel shop—now a deli and bakery as well—and Homegrown Meats was the first local business to sell locally-grown, chemical-free meats. Together the businesses employ 93 people.

The party is a parking lot affair, with free food tastings from local wholesalers, including Duggan's Ingredients, Emerald Valley, Toby's Tofu Palace and others. There will be vegetarian Gardenburgers and Homegrown Meats' hamburgers and hotdogs. You can even win gift certificates from the stores, if you guess the correct number of bagels loaded into the back of a convertible.

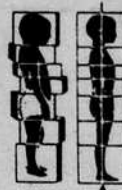
Tidbits from the food and restaurant scene. . . .

The old Zoo Zoo's Restaurant, 454 Willamette St., by the railroad station, is reopened now as the *Kestrel Cafe*. The cafe serves breakfast and lunch daily. The menu is down-home, spiced up with Gumbo and a few other Cajun-Creole dishes. Two of the three owners were formerly at the Keystone Cafe.

Friendly's Market & Delicatessen, 2757 Friendly St., is undergoing changes now that Sylvia Gagnon formerly of Edibles Catering, has bought the business. The combination grocery and deli has seating in an area that features changing local artwork. A growing menu of salads, sandwiches and baked goods will eventually include dinner entrees to go.

Sam Haworth's catering business, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, now has a take-out storefront at 1609 E. 19th (corner of Agate). The menu is large and varied, with many international dishes and rich desserts.

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