

Beltsville Symposium XXIII: Food Quality and Safety

Salmonella, *E. coli*, *Cyclospora*—are dreaded names of foodborne pathogens associated with food poisoning. But consumers can rest a little easier knowing that USDA's Agricultural Research Service is gaining ground in the food safety war against these and other formidable enemies.

A major milestone in that war will be the Beltsville Symposium XXIII scheduled for May 3-6 at ARS' Beltsville (Maryland) Agricultural Research Center.

"Quality and safety of fresh fruits and vegetables will be the focus of this conference," says K. Darwin Murrell, ARS deputy administrator. "This theme is especially timely and important because of the shifting emphasis on marketing fresh produce.

"New dietary research information encourages us to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables to maintain our health," Murrell continues. "Therefore, as agricultural scientists, we need to ensure that fruits and vegetables contain the maximum nutrients possible and that they are virtually free of harmful microorganisms. We're also looking for new methods to produce, handle, and market both fresh-cut and whole fruits and vegetables."

Increased consumer demand for fresh-cut fruits and vegetables for convenience opens up a new food safety issue. Cutting fresh produce before marketing removes natural barriers, exposing cut surfaces to

potential contaminants. ARS is developing new intervention strategies to ensure that pathogens do not grow on these products.

Murrell says this symposium marks the 23rd year that ARS has hosted researchers, growers, processors, and consumers to discuss major issues that affect all aspects of agriculture.

"The Beltsville Symposium traditionally attracts an international audience. Along with U.S. experts, we also invite international, world-renowned speakers to address contemporary and current issues," he explains.

Rolf Kuchenbuch of the Institute for Vegetable and Ornamental Crops in Grossbeeren, Germany, will discuss sensory analysis of quality, says Kenneth C. Gross. Gross co-chairs this year's symposium with Chien Yi Wang, a horticulturist at the ARS Horticultural Crops Quality Laboratory, which Gross heads.

"Along with ARS scientists, we'll also have speakers from New Zealand; the Universities of California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, and Massachusetts; Michigan State University; as well as from industry," says Gross.

Packaging and handling microbial populations are primary concerns for industry, as is HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) monitoring and controlling of microbiological hazards. These topics will be discussed by Robert

Brackett of the University of Georgia; Dean Cliver of the University of California; and industry representatives Devon Zagory of Devon Zagory Associates, Davis, California, and Tom Hankinson of Pure Produce, Inc., Worcester, Massachusetts.

This year's food safety and quality theme is especially timely, since the Food and Drug Administration plans to issue its "Guide to Minimizing Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables" in June 1998.

Because of the importance of quality as well as safety and shelf life of both whole and fresh-cut fruits and vegetables, a significant part of the symposium will focus on measuring and evaluating quality.

The symposium is co-sponsored by Friends of Agricultural Research at Beltsville (FAR-B). For additional information or to register for Beltsville Symposium XXIII, contact Kendra Jenkins, USDA, ARS, Bldg. 002, Room 117, 10300 Baltimore Avenue, Beltsville, MD 20705-2350; phone (301) 504-6128, fax (301) 504-5107.—By **Doris Stanley**, ARS.

Kenneth C. Gross and Chien Yi Wang can be reached at the USDA-ARS Horticultural Crops Quality Laboratory, 10300 Baltimore Ave., Beltsville, MD 20705-2350; phone (301) 504-6128, fax (301) 504-5107, e-mail kgross@asrr.arsusda.gov cwang@asrr.arsusda.gov