

The Pelican Tee Shirt

A hoax is apparently being propagated concerning tomatoes as a source of salmonella? When I first heard of this I told my wife I thought people were being misled perhaps to cover some federal agency stretch mark. And it reminded me of a story.

Many years ago the local newspapers reported a case of a small child losing a ten dollar bill. Supposedly a large dog had attacked and taken it from his clenched fist. The dog was reported as a large mangy dog with tangled hair and police were dispatched to keep a look out. The story the child told authorities, however, did not have the ring of truth. The ferocity of the dog was suspect! I told this to my wife who was crime lab director at the time and I suggested they might have a gang operating in the vicinity. Several days later it turned out that a gang was caught, operating near the same school, robbing young school children of their lunch money. The young man had been the target of this gang and he rescinded his story and helped the police identify the thugs.

The tomato story has the same tone of fabrication about it! Look out any glass window. What do you see there. Is the window clean or is it contaminated by salmonella? You don't need a multimillion dollar lab to tell. The surface of the tomato is like that glass window. Unlike an egg where the surface is reticulated and can harbor various evils, the surface of a tomato is like that glass. Dirt is easily seen and just as easily washed off. Any penetration of bacteria through the glassy skin would show as a soft spot or be seen through the skin. The cells in the tomato would die and show their unhappiness with the intruder by developing some discoloration. Most of the compounds that give the tomato color also act as chemical indicators signaling chemical change.

To make things more suspect the testing labs say no salmonella!! They have no reason to lie and they have the state of the art equipment for identifying the little critters. But it gets even more suspect. If the stem area were contaminated, as so-called experts are saying, the bacteria would generally require a liquid to survive. The liquid would simply be removed and with it the contamination. But no one I know would buy tomatoes with such a bacterial ooze on them!!

Recently a number of different new diseases, mostly fungal, have been found in tomatoes where insects have carried the intruder from tomato to tomato. But in most cases you see the intruder clearly visible through the skin. Genetically engineered tomatoes that have a long shelf life also show the vagaries of age and infection as they sit. It is very difficult to hide such problems.

To make the story even less believable, tomatoes are an acid fruit. Acid fruits, if they are exposed to air, generally sustain a variety of acid loving bacteria and fungi that supplant possible hazardous bugs. This is one reason why canning methods are not as stringent for tomatoes.



The question then is what is going on. In milk, hundreds of thousands of bacteria are allowed to grow in the milk as it comes into the dairy. After pasteurization the counts fall to low levels but we tolerate those levels. For a given farm, if the bacterial count becomes too high or the types of bacteria become worrisome then the farmer may take a troubled cow out of production and treat it with antibiotics. In the meantime the milk from that cow is often boiled and fed back to calves assuming there are no toxins present.

In tomatoes there are numerous built in protections as already mentioned. Presence of bacteria and other organisms inside the tomato is common. What is not common is a high

The Pelican Tee Shirt

bacterial count or the existence of a growth borne strain of a human pathogen. Soil bacteria are generally not carried through the plant and are often benign, where the numbers game would seem to preclude exceeding the normal levels needed for pathogenicity.

This leads us back to the boy and the ten dollar bill. It must be a really big shaggy mangy Roma tomato with blood dripping off its big red veggie teeth and a wow, nasty attitude. Otherwise, in short, I simply don't buy it. If there has been a germ warfare attack, yes I might believe that. So tell us already. If someone thinks the cost of tomatoes is too low, or wants to "make a killing" in tomato futures by scaring the public, I can believe that. If you have 200 dead people from eating the "special salad", maybe you need to cruise the salad bar with some "special salad" police. In short there is probably no need for a congressional investigation into the testing labs. There might, however, need to be a high level congressional investigation into the high level congressional investigation. My advice is follow the money and politics. Tomatoes are probably the fall guy and not the source of this problem per Occam's razor.

A typical scenario might go like this. Bureaucrat "A" secures a deal with the Talaxian government to grant drilling rights to certain properties in the Americas in return for a law requiring US products to show genetic labeling. Bureaucrat "B" thinks that's hunky-dory but they don't want to irritate the growers and shakers (Krogers) and so they dream up a scheme whereby only the genetically modified version of some product, say tomatoes, carries some deadly disease. This project is then subrogated to one of the new, tripled in size, what a surprise, CIA homeland security homey bag boyz. The Salmonella strain they get from Fort Dix is a little too "steep".

Things like that really don't happen of course, but if they did.

In the meantime, and to illustrate the extent of the silliness here, you may want to get one of those automatic deer cameras and mount it in your tomato patch. When the giant infectious whatever-it-is shows up and injects your tomatoes with lethal levels of salmonella you will be the first to have it on Youtube (Headlines next week: "Killer native pumpkins cause old age, the vine that kills, who knew?? Japanese sign new security pact while Japanese gourd exports go crazy.").