

Chipotle's Checkered Food Safety Should Cause Consumer Chill

(Editorial Column: *I have ghostwritten this column for the CEO of a food science company. I would insert the most crucial portions of the following endnotes as hyperlinks in the body of the column. I would then retain the notes below in an electronic file, in case if the column's analysis is questioned by readers.*)

These are troubled times on the frontier of food safety in North America. About 6.8 million Canadians are estimated to suffer food poisoning each yearⁱ and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports that in the US, there are about 48 million cases, annually. A recent, disturbing case is Chipotle's Mexican Grill, a popular US fast-food chain that started some 22 years ago in Denver, with Canadian locations now in Metropolitan Toronto and Vancouver. A recent food safety scandal at some of Chipotle's US locations has caused significant consumer chill, including a drop in US sales of 44% at its peak, during the last quarter of 2015.

Chipotle's case exemplifies what happens when food safety is disregarded, as it often is, by small- and medium-sized retailers, in North America. Six outbreaks of food poisoning occurred in Chipotle's restaurants between last July and December, 2015. First, in August, after eating contaminated produce in Simi Valley, California, six high school students and one parent contracted norovirus and later filed civil lawsuits against the company. By December, company share values dropped by 8%, when news broke that Chipotle also had an E.coli outbreak that had spread across the US. Now Chipotle's investors are also suing.

But the beleaguered food chain, which has launched a \$50 Million ad campaign to resurrect itself, understates the problem. A public letter penned by Chipotle founder and co-CEO, Steve Eells, appears deeply submerged in the data of the company website.ⁱⁱ There, Eells refers only to "52 people" who experienced **E.coli** and a "140 people at a single Chipotle restaurant in Boston" who contracted the **norovirus**.

Eells elsewhere subordinates the importance of the food-borne illnesses contracted by his customers as "an unfortunate series of events," and, in his online letter, a "difficult time." Buried at least six screen shots below the "Food Safety" pages are more serious facts: in August, 2015, norovirus sickened at least 243 customers through one restaurant in Simi Valley, California;ⁱⁱⁱ and another 143 in Boston.^{iv}

Chipotle's website further reports uncorroborated figures that in August, 2015, the chain saw an outbreak of **salmonella** in Minnesota and Wisconsin, that sickened 64 and that was "linked to" contaminated fresh tomatoes.^v Between November and December 2015, "Food Safety News" reports that Chipotle's **E.coli** outbreak had infected a full 60 customers, across 14 states.^{vi} In addition to the civil suits announced in January, Chipotle has become object of a US Government's criminal investigation of their food safety records, dating back to January 1, 2013—an investigation spurred by the August 2015 norovirus outbreak.

Besides understating the crisis, Chipotle's upscale website (which reflects its \$50 million marketing and promotional campaign) and comments to the press show elaborate PR spin more than genuine concern for food safety. The company makes disputable and unsubstantiated claims for the safety of its food and ostensibly revised food handling procedures that mislead the public. For instance, amongst the "enhanced food safety program" that Chipotle claims to have started, CFO John Hartung told the press that the chain's new procedure of "blanching" produce "for just a matter of a couple of seconds in boiling water . . . is going to make each ingredient absolutely safe." That claim is disputed by food scientists who argue that "fresh produce would need to be submerged in boiling water much longer than two to five seconds to be an effective kill step."^{vii} Many other lapses, errors and even outright red herrings appear on the website, reflecting Chipotle's inability to contain, much less resolve, its food safety crisis.

The bottom line is that food safety should be expected and practiced by all North American food retailers, including the small- and medium-sized producers, whether or not they have had a serious recall or caused illness that becomes associated with their brands.

Canada is by no means immune, since we import 80% of our fresh fruit and vegetables from the US or overseas.^{viii}

Chipotle's case demonstrates one of many crises waiting to happen in North America's food safety system: food retailers like it wait for a problem to develop before taking serious, preventative measures. This pattern of denial and inaction itself reflects the urgent need for government commitment to execute laws that will make food safe— from the farming of crops through to their packaging. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) through the Safe Food for Canadians Act (2012) should take timely action to enforce mandatory recalls by inspectors and to demand proper record keeping, from the start. Instead, the government relies on retailers to identify and expose failures.^{ix}

Without adequately measuring food safety methods, Canada is certain to face much more of our own food-borne illness in the future. Companies like Chipotle will continue to profit at the expense of food safety— and with it, of consumers' lives.

ⁱ Conference Board of Canada (2012), "Improving Food Safety in Canada: Toward a More Risk-Responsive System." Co-authors Daniel Munro, Jean-Charles Le Vallee, and James Stuckey.

ⁱⁱ Ells' letter and the restaurant's subsection, "Details on the 2015 Foodborne illness incidents," appear only after at least six screen lengths that detail the company's new "Food Safety Procedures." See www.chipotle.com/founderletter and www.chipotle.com/2015incidents.

ⁱⁱⁱ Coral Beach's otherwise excellent article, "Chipotle plans \$50 million ad blitz amidst expanded criminal investigation" in "Food Safety News" (February 3, 2016), cites only 234 norovirus victims, which may be a typing error. She reports "at least 18 employees" were also affected by the norovirus outbreak, which Chipotle's website

does not acknowledge. Norovirus causes vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramping and dehydration (www.cdc.gov/norovirus/about/symptoms.html).

^{iv} www.chipotle.com/2015incidents.

^v www.chipotle.com/2015incidents.

^{vi} Coral Beach's article cites 14, not 11, states, as Chipotle's website claims (www.chipotle.com/2015incidents). Chipotle names California, Delaware, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon and Washington, as sites of the E. coli outbreak. E. coli causes severe stomach cramps, diarrhea and vomiting and is viewed as more serious than other pathogens, since it can cause kidney failure (see www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/fs-sa/fs-fi/ecoli-eng.php). Salmonella causes diarrhea, vomiting, stomach cramps and fever (<http://www.webmd.com/food-recipes/food-poisoning/ss/slideshow-salmonella>). Although E.coli is the most dangerous of these pathogens, norovirus and salmonella can be life-threatening for those with weak immune systems (e.g. children and the elderly).

^{vii} Hartung is quoted in Coral Beach's article (see note iii, above). The dissenting view is offered by Drs. Keith Schneider (University of Florida) and Trevor Suslow (University of California-Davis), quoted in the same article.

^{viii} Dr. Keith Warriner, professor of food safety at the University of Guelph, on CBC radio's "The Current" ("Listeriosis outbreak in packaged salad highlights risk of lettuce"), February 9, 2016. (www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent).

^{ix} X's Software's Technologies has been developed to keep accurate and thorough food safety records, in compliance with CFIA, including the HACCP (Hazard Analysis). (See www.company_name.com.) Currently, some manufacturers keep only spotty records, sometimes made only by hand, and just in time for periodic inspections. This situation should worry and outrage consumers.