

Needled Strawberries in Australia: Food Terrorism Down Under

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There is something peculiar doing the rounds in Australian food circles. The land down under, considered something of a nirvana of fruit and vegetable production despite horrendous droughts and calamitous cyclones, is facing a new challenge: human agency, namely in the form of despoliation of strawberries.

The results have knocked Australia's highly concentrated supermarket chains, with both Coles and Aldi withdrawing all their fruit with a nervousness that has not been seen in years. A spate of incidents involving "contamination", or pins stuck in the fruit, have manifested across a range of outlets. Strawberry brands including Donnybrook Berries, Love Berry, Delightful Strawberries, Oasis brands, Berry Obsession, Berry Licious and Mal's Black Label have made it onto the list of needled suppliers. There have been possible copycat initiatives doing the rounds.

"This," [exclaimed](#) Strawberries Australia Inc. Queensland spokesman Ray Daniels, "is food terrorism that is bringing an industry to its knees."

The game of food contamination, infection or, as Daniels deems it, food terrorism, is the sort of thing that multiplies in fear and emotion. It targets the industry itself (the strawberry market is already frail before the effects of pest and blight), and ensures maximum publicity for the perpetrator. Then there is the constant fear of a potential victim, the all stifling terror of legal action that might find a target in the form of a provider. Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt [has already](#) boosted such feelings, ordering the Food Standards Australia New Zealand to investigate the matter. "This is a vicious crime, it's designed to injure and possibly worse, members of the population at large."

Out of 800,000 punnets of strawberries, notes Daniels, seven needles were found. "You've got more chance of winning lotto than being affected." Take your chance, and, as with all food production, hope for the best as you would hope for the arrival of a green goddess.

Others such as [Anthony Kachenko](#) of Hort Innovation Australia have also moved into a mode of reassurance, a salutary reminder that Australia remains in the stratosphere of food excellence despite such adventurous despoilers. Sabotage it might be, but it was surely isolated, a nonsense that could be dealt with surgical accuracy.

"Australia prides itself on safe, healthy, nutritious produce and we have the utmost confidence in the produce that we grow both for the domestic and the export markets."

Such attitudes mask the fundamental bet that has characterised human existence since these unfortunate bipeds decided to experiment with the cooked and uncooked. History shows that wells have been poisoned and fields salted. The divorce from hunter gatherer to industrialist consumer oblivious to the origins of food made that matter even more poignant, and, in some cases, tragic. The consumer is at the mercy of the production line, and everything else that finds its way into it.

The food science fraternity are being drawn out to explain the meddling, pitching for greater funding, and another spike in industry funds.

“The things we’re usually concerned about,” [suggests](#) Kim Phan-Thien of the University of Sydney, “are the accidental contaminants; spray drift or microbial contamination [which is] a natural risk in the production system.”

What was needed, claimed the good food science pundit, was an examination, not merely of “unintentional adulteration and contaminants but the intentional adulteration for economic gain or a malicious reason for a form of terrorism.”

Take a punt (or in this case, a punnet), and hope that source, process and final destination are somehow safe. The cautionary note here is to simply cut the suspect fruit to ensure no errant needles or pins have found their way into them. (This presumes the needle suspect was probably hygienic.)

But the strawberry nightmare highlights the insecurity within the food industry, the permanent vulnerability that afflicts a multi-process set of transactions, recipients and consumers. Purchasing anything off the stands, and in any aisle of a supermarket is never a guarantee of safety, a leap of faith based upon a coma inflicted by industrial complacency. We are left at the mercy of speculative fancy: the item we take home is what it supposedly is, irrespective of labelling, accurate or otherwise.

The scare, as it is now being termed, has had the sort of impact any fearful threat to health and safety does: an increased focus on security, a boost in food surveillance and the gurus versed in the business of providing machinery. Strawberry Growers Association of Western Australia President Neil Handasyde [revealed](#) that growers were being pressed for increased scanning in the form of metal detectors.

“As an industry we are sure that [the needles] are not coming from the farm, but we’re about trying to get confidence into customers that when they buy a punnet of strawberries, that there isn’t going to be anything other than strawberries in there and they’re safe to eat.”

Possibly guilty parties have been distancing themselves with feverish necessity. This, as much as anything else, reeks of the legal advice necessary to avoid paying for any injury that might result. Mal’s Black Label strawberries, one of the growing number of needle recipients, has taken [the line](#) that the farm is above suspicion, with the suspects to be found elsewhere. Strawberry grower Tony Holl suggested that some figure was floating around, needle and all, intent on fulfilling the wishes of “a real vendetta”.

A [reward](#) of \$100,000 has been offered by the Queensland government for capturing the villain in question, if, indeed, there is a conscious, all-rounded creature doing the rounds.

He, she, or it, has now assumed various titles from the Queensland authorities. The “strawberry spiker” or “strawberry saboteur” seem less like life-threatening agents than lifestyle names intent on an encyclopaedic entry. But biosecurity, and matters of food health, are matters that throb and pulsate in Australia. Authorities are promising to find the culprit. The culprit may have other designs.

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