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Recipe for Disaster

Filling station food and botulism

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A service station fueling both vehicles and tummies was Ground Zero for a deadly foodborne outbreak in California last April. It happened near Sacramento. At least ten persons who ate filling station nachos doused with cheese sauce had emergency hospitalizations. One died. The culprit was botulism, the deadliest of all foodborne illnesses.

California health officials zeroed in on the jalapeño cheese sauce. The filling station had several five pound pouches of this yellow cheese goo. An opened bag tested positive for botulism toxin, but other unopened bags at the station and elsewhere all tested negative. Federal inspectors gave the cheese production facility in Wisconsin a clean bill of health. The county cited the filling station for “failure to protect food from contamination,” but how the cheese sauce became contaminated remains a whodunit.

Hopefully what happened in California stays in California. This was not their first rodeo. A botulism outbreak from improperly processed ripe olives caused 19 deaths in 1919 due to a defective vacuum seal on the jars.

According to an article published 100 years ago in the New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal, “Cases of botulism are not common in this country.” Fortunately, that rarity remains true but sporadic cases and an occasional outbreak continue to occur.

The bacteria that produce the deadly botulism toxin are widespread in nature. They thrive in low oxygen environments such as soil and stream sediments. Just as we plan for hurricanes with supplies and evacuation routes, these bacteria are programmed with

survival techniques for less than hospitable conditions. They form spores, which can survive freezing and boiling, but not proper processing in a pressure cooker.

Spores are bacterial versions of ISIS sleeper cells lying in wait for years to decades for the right growth conditions. In a nutrient-rich liquid or goo at room temperature with reduced oxygen content, the spores transform into toxin-producing bacterial factories. Botulism toxin is odorless and tasteless.

German health officials first linked outbreaks of paralytic illnesses to consumption of spoiled sausages in the eighteenth century. The sausage makers cleaned up their act, and those outbreaks disappeared. During the 1900s improper home canning techniques caused most cases. As home canning has decreased in popularity, botulism continues to surface in different venues.

Across our state line at a federal prison in Yazoo City, Mississippi, at least 17 inmates ended up in hospitals with botulism from drinking homemade prison hooch in 2016. But Louisiana only reported 14 cases of botulism in the past 20 years, and most involved infants.

“Gosh, that was a long time ago. I was a resident at Children’s Hospital. I remember the baby came in with a flaccid paralysis – weak muscles and difficulty moving. We made the diagnosis by the history. The parents had purchased some raw honey at a roadside stand somewhere in rural Louisiana. Fortunately, the child completely recovered,” said Dr. Robert Faucheux, a pediatrician in Covington.

Botox the drug

The most potent neurotoxin known to man, the sausage poison of the 1800s, is now a sought-after pharmaceutical product. Miniscule injections of carefully assayed and diluted botulism toxin have multiple medical indications from ironing out forehead wrinkles and crow’s feet to control of excessive blinking and migraines.

Dr. Faucheux and his colleagues published a case report describing how they diagnosed and treated the three-month-old infant with botulism. While ingestion of preformed toxin causes botulism in adults, the mechanism is different in infants. Babies lack the protective bile acids and natural bacterial flora to keep botulism spores at bay. Spores can germinate into toxin-producing bacteria in their immature intestines. Raw honey is normally contaminated with botulism spores. Babies should not be fed honey for their first year. But the ubiquitous spores can be acquired in other ways such as by dust exposure from a construction site.

Back to filling station food. Louisiana boasts exceptional examples of filling stations serving food. The combination Shell station and Billeaud’s Grocery in Broussard just off Highway 90 is world renowned for its boudin and cracklins. In New Orleans, several filling stations fry chicken that put the Colonel and Al to shame.

Fried chicken parts may not be on the top of the culinary health heap, but no one ever contracted botulism from eating fried food. Since Galatoires deselected chicken livers from their menu years ago, Fuel N Mart, 4140 South Claiborne Ave, is my go-to stop for these fried delicacies.

“Baby, we got chicken. We got their livers. We got gizzards. We got fish on Fridays and meat pies sometimes. We fry it all. People make special trips for our livers, but gizzards are our best seller,” said Mary Tucker, one of two fry masters at Fuel N Mart operating out of a small standup space across the aisle from the filling station cashier.

“Darling, I don’t know what kind of oil we use, but it comes from Marque’s on the Westbank. Look right back there. There should be

some sort of label on that box. All the chicken parts and seasonings too – Marque’s delivers it all.” The label read “clear fry soybean oil”.

Chicken is in the Marque DNA. It evolved from a corner grocery store selling fresh dressed chickens into a major supply house. For warehouse shopping lovers (you know who you are), Marque’s Market is a family owned Costco and Sams trimmed to the Nawlins’ essentials from snowball supplies to liquid plumber. It is open to all at 2320 8th Avenue in Harvey without membership fees or proof of restaurant association.

Key’s Fuel Mart, 1139 N Rampart St, just across from the French Quarter, is another gas station under the culinary radar. It receives raves for its fried chicken, but they don’t fry livers or gizzards. Ideal Discount, 3340 Orleans Avenue near the bayou, is yet another favorite.
