

Food-safety savvy

Rastelli Foods Group champions food safety using bar-raising technology and practices

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When it comes to maintaining and enhancing food safety, Swedesboro, NJ-based Rastelli Foods Group (RFG) is well on top of its game in supplying a wide range of premium quality meat and seafood products to the finest hotels, restaurants, institutions and retail global customers. Company food-safety leaders are constantly on the prowl for proven technologies to help them produce even safer products.

“Our primary business is focused around foodservice and institutional use,” explains Carl “Chip” Zerr, Director of International Food Safety and Quality Assurance. The company

offers a variety of gourmet beef, veal, pork, lamb, game, poultry and seafood products; heat-and-serve items; desserts, as well as gift packages via its national home-delivery program.

RFG operates three federally inspected processing facilities – a 75,000-sq.-ft., meat plant in Swedesboro, and a food processing and cooking operation at a manufacturing plant, Rastelli/Metzgermeister, in Ciales, Puerto Rico; a US Food and Drug Administration-regulated seafood processing plant – Rastelli Seafood – in Egg Harbor, NJ; plus a 110,000-sq.-ft. USDA-inspected distribution facility for distribution of

products to US Military Prime Vendors in Swedesboro.

“Our primary [Swedesboro] facility processes raw-meat proteins for the foodservice industry,” Zerr explains. “Our ready-to-eat facility [in Puerto Rico] processes fully cooked products distributed for retail, institutional and school lunch programs. Our seafood facility processes fresh local seafood for foodservice use. The global distribution facility consolidates and exports foodstuffs around the world.”

Beef products include Pureland Angus brand strip steak, ribeye steak, flank steak, sirloin steak, burgers and ground beef products, Porterhouse

Steak, sirloin tri-tip steak and T-bone steak. Pork products include Pureland Pork Cowboy steak, boneless center cut loin, Porterhouse steak and center-cut frenched racks. All-natural beef products include Canyon Valley All Natural Beef brand strip, sirloin, ribeye and tenderloin steaks.

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Tony Luke's Pronto Philly Style Beef Cheesesteak with Rolls, Chicken Cheesesteak with Rolls and Roast Pork Au Jus with Rolls are also offered in the US. An aggressive global expansion plan for this line is being planned.

Food-safety focus

Quality assurance at Rastelli Foods Group begins with vertical integration. Through direct ownership and

or proprietary partnerships with suppliers, RFG ensures quality and safety at all points of distribution. This program results in safer, higher-quality products direct to its customers, the company maintains.

RFG's food-safety staff/managers include Carl Zerr, Director of Food Safety; Grazyna Allen, Food-Safety Manager, Rastelli Foods; David Ricciardelli, Quality Assurance Manager, Rastelli Global; Skip Fox, Operations Manager/SQF Practitioner, Rastelli Seafood; and Eric Negron, Metzgermeister and Research Corporation (Rastelli Caribbean), Quality Assurance Manager.

Qualifications raw-material suppliers must meet to serve RFG include they must operate under USDA inspection; must have a written and audited humane animal-handling practice; pass annual food-safety audits from an independent audit firm; employ scientifically validated pathogen intervention systems, audited annually; employ a pathogen-detection plan; have an approved, comprehen-

sive food-safety and quality program – and must have never issued a product recall.

Food-safety policies in place and interventions used in RFG's two meat plants include contract sanitation, which includes complete facility sanitation daily; weekly assessment of sanitation is made using ATP swabs; floor foamers, foot baths and hand-dip stations are used throughout the plants; comprehensive employee training is conducted; HEPA (High-Efficiency Particulate Air) filtration and ultra-violet air purification are utilized; an ozonated water system has been incorporated; validated pathogen interventions on all non-intact/ground-beef products are in place; daily pathogen samples for testing are routinely taken; and a test-and-hold program is enforced on all ground, injected products.

Among the advanced technology in RFG's food-safety arsenal are various rapid tests from FoodChek Systems Inc., Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Its *E. coli* O157 test is used at RFG's

Swedesboro headquarters beef plant while the *Listeria* test is used at the company's seafood plant.

"I want accuracy, sensitivity, reproducibility, costs, time-saving and ease of use," Zerr says of rapid-testing systems. "The most important thing to me is accuracy."

Zerr likes the accuracy of the results, the ease of preparation and sample protocols to put everything together regarding his *E. coli* O157 rapid test. "I didn't need to hire a microbiologist to do the testing," he adds. "The cost of the FoodChek Reader unit, test cassettes and pickup transportation savings I get by not sending every test to an independent lab is another factor."

RFG conducts many in-house

screening tests. Zerr still sends bi-weekly samples to an independent lab to confirm that his in-house test results are consistent, but he has reduced this practice by about 90 percent.

Rastelli Foods now samples and tests products for the presence of *E. coli* O157 pathogens in its ground beef at 15-minute intervals. Before, tests may have been done two or three times a day. But over his first year despite increasing their testing, the company has saved around \$14,000 with FoodChek's system, Zerr says.

Training is key

RFG conducts new-hire training plus annual refresher training that is heavily skewed to maintaining and improv-

ing food safety. All training, which is documented, includes: Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (food-safety basics); Sanitation Standard Operating Procedures (good sanitation and handling practices); good manufacturing practices; allergen training (What are allergens and how do company employees handle them?); food security/defense training; and Safe Quality Food and the Global Food Safety Initiative (describes what company food-safety requirements are and how are they achieved).

When asked about the biggest challenge in maintaining food safety in RFG's meat/poultry plants and products, Zerr answers: "Keeping ahead of the industry and regulatory curves.



Courtesy of FoodChek



“I want accuracy, sensitivity, reproducibility, costs, time-saving and ease of use [regarding rapid tests].”

We try to predict what is coming from a regulatory perspective and what we should attain in order to best protect the consumer, as well as our brand. We are always investigating new and improved pathogen interventions, food-safety strategies, microbiological detection methods and we like to keep at the forefront of the industry.”

In preparation for future demand,

the company is currently performing an investigative study into a new, natural alternative as an intervention against *E. coli*, STEC, *Salmonella*, and other known pathogens, which Zerr prefers to keep close to the vest for the time being. “It will be applied to all ground-beef components prior to grinding,” Zerr says. “It is naturally occurring, has incredible microbio-

logical reduction benefits, and it has no effect on color, flavor or texture of the finished beef product. We would be the first in the country to use this application for grinding.”

Food safety is a top priority, Zerr insists. “But that drive and desire has to come from within the organization, not because of a regulatory standard,” he adds. “Federal and state standards are created to help ensure total food safety. But often these regulations can become skewed or misinterpreted.

“Therefore, we feel it is better to be proactive and search for what and how the industry is developing. By staying ahead of the curve, we can continue to build far into the future,” he concludes. ■

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