

Tomato crisis kept New York distributors on their toes

By Doug Ohlemeier
Eastern Editor

NEW YORK — The shockwaves of the Salmonella Saintpaul crisis that hammered tomato markets have ricocheted throughout the Hunts Point Terminal Market.

The summer crisis, in which the Food and Drug Administration pointed the finger of blame at tomatoes then targeted hot peppers, sent market wholesalers scrambling.

Many market customers returned loads of product. Distributors also had to keep in contact with their longtime tomato suppliers to be assured loads were free of contamination.

Impact of crisis

Much like the spinach E. coli crisis two years earlier, market co-chairman Matthew D'Arrigo, vice president of D'Arrigo Bros. Co. of New York Inc., said the crisis had a big effect on the market.

"To the extent of how many tomatoes were here, how many were in the trucks coming to us and before it all sank in — before everyone knew what was going on — there was a good couple of weeks of produce that was truly affected by it in terms of not knowing what was happening," he said.

"Then there were a couple of months of low demand and lack of sales because of public perception of what was going on after the FDA's stand."

Shipments of fresh tomatoes likely turn over in inventory on the market two to three times a week. Product on the market on Monday morning is quickly sold before another load arrives.

Certain items, such as strawberries, likely turn over as many as five times a week, D'Arrigo said.

Blame abundant

There was no shortage of blame

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Robert T. Cochran & Co. Inc.

among Bronx wholesalers for the FDA's actions.

"The government jumped the gun. That's for sure," said Richard Cochran, president of Robert T. Cochran & Co. Inc.

"They had no evidence whatsoever but said it was tomatoes."

The tomato market — which had been \$16 a box — quickly collapsed to \$6.

Thomas Cignarella, president of Morris Okun Inc., called it a "gut-wrenching experience."

Cignarella said many of his customers returned product to the distributor because many of their customers had returned the tomatoes they purchased to Okun's customer vendors.

He said everything worked out involving such returns because of Okun's relationships with its tomato shippers.

Though tomato sales stopped for a short time, they then began to slowly increase and kept moving, Cignarella said.

Specialties affected

The salmonella scare even affected specialties purveyors.

"That messed up our business a

lot when we got hit," said Maria Tejada, saleswoman for Coosemans New York Inc.

"People right away got scared every time when they looked at the news and read something new."

During the crisis, Tejada said Coosemans answered customer inquiries by keeping the customers updated on which products the illness originated in and what was going on with the situation.

Coosemans sells regular 5x6-size tomatoes.

The distributor was also affected by the 2006 spinach recall because baby and cello spinach represent big-selling items for Coosemans.

During the tomato crisis, J. Kings Foodservice Professionals Inc., Holtsville, benefited from its membership with Monterey, Calif.-based Pro*Act, said Joel Panagakos, J. Kings' executive vice president.

Advance customer notification

As federal authorities began announcing what foods were and weren't safe to eat before the crisis hit the national news, Panagakos said J. Kings made a decision to distribute only Canadian and locally grown tomatoes on-the-vine, plum tomatoes, round tomatoes and hothouse tomatoes.

J. Kings only shipped approved tomatoes and notified its customers in a letter of more changes in the type of tomatoes it planned to ship, Panagakos said.

This preceded the FDA recommending consumers stop eating certain types of tomatoes.

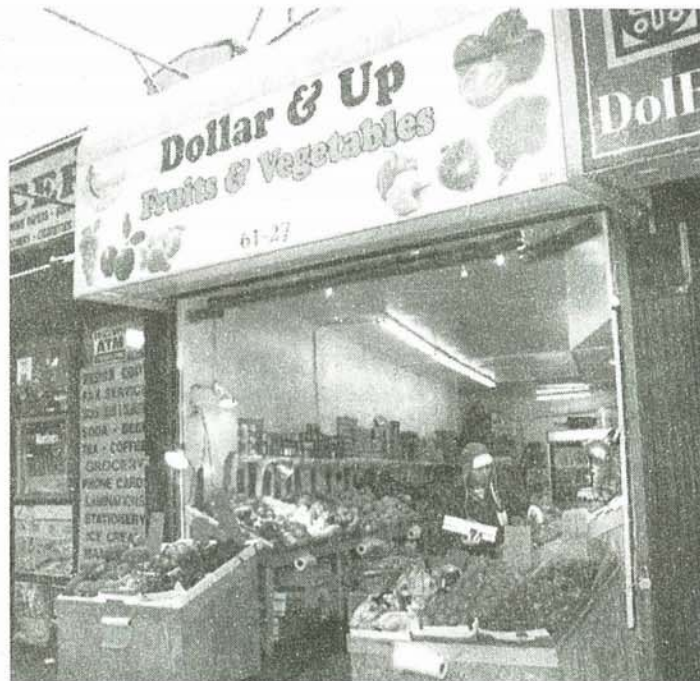
Before the tomato investigation hit the newspapers, all of J. Kings' customers had been made aware of the problem, Panagakos said.

They didn't initially understand why J. Kings was making those substitutions, but realized what had happened when it became front-page news.



Photos by Doug Ohlemeier

David Conyers, a salesman with Krisp-Pak Sales Corp., examines a box of roma tomatoes. Wholesalers say they were met with considerable concern from customers regarding the safety of their tomatoes during last summer's Salmonella Saintpaul outbreak.



Produce stores such as this one in Brooklyn abound in the country's largest city. Distributors at the Hunts Point Terminal Market say many of their customers returned loads of tomatoes in response to the Salmonella Saintpaul outbreak.