



Chicago Tribune

FINAL

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2006

NEAR WEST

Spinach put back on the dinner table

FDA says it's safe, but check its source

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Spinach lovers got the green light Tuesday to start eating the leafy vegetables again—as long as they are not from certain California fields.

In statements Monday and Tuesday, the FDA said it had traced spinach tainted with *E. coli* bacteria to three California counties, and consumers could be confident that spinach grown elsewhere is safe.

In the last few days, bags of fresh spinach have started popping up on the same grocery store shelves that weeks ago had been stripped of every trace of the stuff.

"My customers will be thrilled," said Hema Potla, owner of Hema's Kitchen, an Indian restaurant in Lincoln Park. "They keep ordering spinach



Tribune photo by Terrence Antonio James
Jesus Patino puts organic spinach in a cold case at Whole Foods, 2626 W. Devon Ave.

even though it's not on the menu. They are spinach-loving people."

She ordered a new batch of spinach Tuesday from her grocer, Fresh Farms, which already

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began selling spinach last Friday. Customers there weren't hesitant to give spinach a second chance, said manager Chirgli Hting. The store sold more than 400 pounds over the week-

end.

Whole Foods plans to have fresh and bagged spinach on its shelves by the end of the week, according to a spokeswoman. Jewel and Dominick's have not yet brought back spinach, but both chains were discussing the details of its return, according to spokeswoman.

The FDA said spinach is safe to eat if it was not grown in the California counties of Monterey, San Benito or Santa Clara. Both the frozen and canned varieties of spinach are also fine to eat, officials said.

The only way for consumers to know where their spinach was grown is to read the labels.

'At this point we are probably seeing the tail end of the outbreak.'

—Dr. Howard Backer

However, officials acknowledge that not all packages say where the food was grown.

"Consumers are advised not to buy or eat fresh spinach if they cannot verify that it was grown in areas other than the three California counties implicated in the outbreak," the Illinois Department of Public Health said Tuesday.

At least 183 people in 26 states have become ill during the outbreak. One woman in Wisconsin died and officials are looking at two other deaths—a 2-year-old in Idaho and an elderly Maryland woman—that also may be linked to consumption of spinach contaminated with *E. coli*.

"At this point we are probably seeing the tail end of the outbreak," said Dr. Howard Backer, acting California public health officer.

Meanwhile, the investigation of a possible source of the outbreak remains focused on Natural Selection Foods in San Juan Bautista.

It appears that the spinach implicated in the outbreak was packaged by Natural Selection for Dole on Aug. 15 and grown at one or more of nine ranches in the three California counties, said Kevin Reilly, deputy director of Prevention Services at the California Department of Health Services.

In Illinois, the Department of Health released test results Tuesday for the fresh-bagged spinach found in the home of an elderly woman in LaSalle County who became sick from eating it. Her spinach matched the strain of *E. coli* from the tainted California spinach, ruling out a local problem.

"We're relieved it's not more widespread," said Kimberly Parker, a spokeswoman for the state public health director.

For spinach lovers in Chicago, news spread quickly that their favorite green was back from exile.

Poking at his vegan polenta—still sans spinach—in Lakeview's Chicago Diner Tuesday, Brad Bass, 26, was relieved to hear one of the staples of his diet had returned.

"I miss it," Bass said. "I miss it in my omelets, and I also love a good spinach salad."

At Orange restaurant in Lakeview, manager Chad McClard had cut back on the greens in his own diet.

"I love spinach," said McClard, 27. "It's one of the only greens I like. Otherwise it's back to steak and potatoes."

Some restaurant owners were concerned whether customers would give spinach another chance.

"Even now that the ban is lifted, I believe that people will not switch immediately to spinach," said Michael Mitsoglou, the owner of three Nookies restaurants in the Chicago area. Mitsoglou, 45, also said he would be cautious as to where the greens for the restaurants' Greek and vegetable omelets were coming from.

"Of course I'm happy," said Mitsoglou. "But I'm going to make sure that my spinach doesn't come from California."

Mitsoglou said his businesses likely lost more than \$400 as a result of throwing away spinach and salad mixes that included baby spinach.

"It was a disaster for us," he said.

At the Chicago Diner, restaurant manager Lara Akerele, 37, said she was concerned customers would be wary about ordering spinach in the dishes and juices.

"I don't want spinach to get a bad rap," said the South Shore resident, who continued to consume locally grown organic spinach despite the FDA's ban. "It didn't stop me, I still used it in my juices."

Over time, Akerele said she thinks people will forget about the crisis and start eating the green once again. "Sprouts had a scare," she said, "and now everyone's eating sprouts."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.