Food toxicologist Carl Winter, with his keyboard at his feet, is noted for such tunes as "You Better Wash Your Hands," sung to the Beatles' "I Want to Hold Your Hand," and "Stomachache Tonight," to the Eagles' "Heartache Tonight." He's at ease Tuesday on the UC Davis campus, above, or his office, below.

UCD expert parodies songs to warn of food's dangers

Food safety is serious business, as the recent E. coli outbreak has shown. But a food toxicologist from the University of California, Davis, is using a light blend of music and parody to get important food safety messages across to the public.

As director of the university's FoodSafe Program, Carl K. Winter has spent his career studying and teaching the ways foods can make people sick or kill them.

Over the last 10 years, the amateur musician also has been writing humorous lyrics to popular songs to convey critical messages such as the importance of keeping cold foods cold and cooking meats to high temperatures.

"It's just an educational tool that works," said Winter, who next month will take his program to Albuquerque for a gathering of biology teachers, and then to Alberta, Canada, for a science festival.

The Beatles, the Monkees, the Drifters and the Village People are among artists subjected to Winter's musical revisions. His parodies are peppered with clever lyrics about bacteria, gastroenteritis, hepatitis and mad cow disease.

By Deb Kollars
BEE STAFF WRITER

To sample Dr. Carl Winter's tunes promoting food safety, go to www.sacbee.com/links

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In his take on Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," he asks, "Hey Salmonellai! / Did you think I'd lay down and die?"

In his play on the Eagles' "Heartache Tonight," called "Stomachache Tonight," he warns that "Some chef is gonna hurt someone / before the night is through / serving up some chicken that's undone / there's nothin' we can do."

And in his rendition of the Beatles' "I Want to Hold Your Hand," he praises hand-washing:

"Before, and after meals / and when you use the can / soap and water, for twenty seconds / should be part of your plan / That's how you wash your hands. / That's how you wash your hands."

Winter accompanies himself on an electronic keyboard, and records in a home music studio. He has distributed 20,000 copies of his CDs - including "Sanitized for Your Consumption" and "Staying Alive."

Winter performs frequently for scientists, educators and students. The Institute of Food Technologists, a national group, named him a distinguished lecturer several years ago, paving the way for appearances across the county.

Michael Doyle, an institute member and director of the University of Georgia's Center for Food Safety, said Winter's approach is offbeat but effective.

"These are important issues," Doyle said of the tenets of food safety. "He captures those ideas and gets the message across."

Dean Cliver, professor of food safety at UC Davis, agreed, noting the scientific underpinnings of food safety don't always prevail among consumers or politicians doling out tax dollars for food safety research.

"What Dr. Winter is trying to do is reach people on their terms," he said. "He gets people's attention in a way others are not."

In recent days, Winter - like other food safety experts at UC Davis and around the country - has been contacted by various news organizations to discuss the E. coli outbreak.

The outbreak, which has sickened more than 180 people and killed one woman, has been traced to contaminated fresh spinach from the Salinas Valley.

Winter said the outbreak was tragic but not surprising. E. coli bacteria are commonly found in the intestines of animals and people. Most strains are harmless, but the one found in the tainted spinach is highly toxic.

"It's so difficult to control something like that," Winter said, noting researchers are still trying to pin down the source.

The worry now, he said, is that consumers will shy away from fresh spinach and other fresh produce. He emphasized that the benefits of eating fresh fruits and vegetables far outweigh the low risk of exposure to bacteria.

"Food in this country is among the safest in the world," he said.

Still, 76 million people a year in the United States experience food-borne illness, he said. Of those, 320,000 are hospitalized annually, and 5,000 die.

With the tainted spinach, there was little consumers could have done to protect themselves, Winter said. In this case, he added, responsibility belongs with those who grew and processed it, and government regulators charged with monitoring that process. The dangerous E. coli strain can be killed by cooking, but consumers of bagged spinach and salad mixes containing spinach assume they are purchasing a product that is safe to eat without cooking, he said.

Winter said he has no plans to write a song about the tainted spinach because of the tragic nature of the situation. But he is working on other new songs aimed at children that will incorporate not only themes of food safety, but also good nutrition and the importance of exercise.

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