In Tune With Food Safety Education

Carl Winter's Greatest Hits

By Sharon Palmer, RD
If you are one of those dietetic professionals who find maintaining food safety somewhere in the fine print of their job description, then you know how tough this task has become. New issues are arising across the food safety horizon—from the advent of new forms of foodborne illness to a mobile, changing foodservice workforce. Trying to keep your foodservice safe from foodborne illness outbreaks is enough to keep you awake at night. And even dietitians who never step foot in a foodservice kitchen are challenged to pick up the food safety banner and take the message to the households of patients, clients, and the community at large. After all, it’s difficult to start a dialogue on nutrition when a safe food supply is up for grabs. Public health messages such as Healthy People 2010 and Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005 include a push for food safety.

Today’s food safety education is moving beyond handouts and lectures. New methods of disseminating the information to promote behavior change are developing in today’s information era. When The Partnership for Food Safety Education Executive Director Shelley Feist appears on NBC’s Today Show to talk about safe food handling, you know it’s time to push the envelope to educate people about food safety.

**A FOOD SAFETY SUPERSTAR IS BORN**

On a fall night last year at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in San Francisco, a group of award-winning food journalists gathered around elegantly decorated tables with courses such as sashimi of kampachi, four spiced grilled squab, Niman Ranch beef tenderloin with brochette of Maine lobster, and crunchy milk chocolate cake with bananas and lime ice cream. For the *piece de resistance*, Carl K. Winter, PhD, was introduced as the evening’s entertainment. He was set to perform a collection of food safety hits while decked out in a John Travolta-worthy suit. A low groan stirred through the audience, but Winter didn’t seem to mind as he sang his hit, “You’d Better Wash Your Hands.” Before you knew it, the journalists were on their feet, singing, clapping, and swaying to the music. Unlike the Beatles’ original song, “I Wanna Hold Your Hand,” Winter’s tune followed the familiar melody with lyrics that went a little something like this:

**Oh yeah I’ll, tell you something**
**I think you’ll understand**
**For the sake of sanitation**
**You’d better wash your hands**
**You’d better wash your hands**
**You’d better wash your hands**

**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
And when you’re finished you’ll feel happy inside
Washin’ so thorough that microbes
They can’t hide, they can’t hide, they can’t hide

Make sure you clean your nails
And dry with towel or fan
Prevent those nasty microbes
From spreadin’ “cross the land
You’d better wash your hands
You’d better wash your hands

And when you’re finished you’ll feel happy inside
Washin’ so thorough that microbes
They can’t hide, they can’t hide, they can’t hide

Oh yeah I’ll, tell you something
I think you’ll understand
For the sake of sanitation
You’d better wash your hands
You’d better wash your hands
You’d better wash your hands
Why don’t you wash your hands

Winter, director of the FoodSafe Program at the University of California, Davis and extension food toxicologist on the faculty of the Food Science and Technology Department, has been called the “Elvis of E. coli,” the “Sinatra of Salmonella,” and the “Artist Formerly Known as Prince of Pesticides” by various news media sources. Standing out as a superstar by using multimedia to educate the masses on food safety, Winter is gaining a reputation with his hilarious parodies of popular music. Winter became the 2003 recipient of the Hod Ogden Medal presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Association of State and Territorial Directors of Health Promotion and Public Health Education recognizing creative efforts that have positively influenced health promotion. In his retrofitted classics, he covers food safety issues such as bacterial contamination, irradiation, biotechnology, government regulation, and pesticides. He has performed for scientific societies, food professionals, agricultural producers and processors, health professionals, educators, public organizations, students from grade school to college, and on television and radio.

So how did Winter find himself belting out food safety oldies for audiences across the country? “I had taken a faculty job at the University of California, Riverside when the pesticide-food issue had just exploded, so I was doing work in that area. I realized food is of importance to everyone—we all have to eat. I wanted to focus on things that were not just esoteric. I wanted to be able to affect a lot of people. Look at all of the populations that have been made ill from foods,” he says.
Winter had always loved music as a hobby but had given it up for several years. He realized that he genuinely missed it. When Winter decided to pick it up again, he noticed how much technology had grown in music. Now one person could create a band with the help of a synthesizer. “I started thinking that it would be interesting if I changed the lyrics of music. I had no intention of this getting bigger. It’s the kind of endeavor that would be sure to fail if you planned it out ahead of time,” he says.

The Institute of Food Technologists was the first group to book his performance and quickly deemed Winter’s program worthy as a lecture. Word of mouth spread and increasingly more groups were interested in scheduling him. Ten years later, he’s still going strong, performing roughly 20 times per year. Although Winter typically performs for food-related groups, he is now targeting more general audiences and is excited about educating children.

**SWEET, SAFE MUSIC**

In 2004, Winter self-produced the CD “Still Stayin’ Alive: A Take Out Menu of Food Safety Hits” and has since sold approximately 20,000 copies worldwide. Songs include “Stomachache Tonight” to the tune of the Eagles’ “Heartache Tonight,” “We Are the Microbes” set to Queen’s “We Are the Champions,” and “Don’t Get Sicky Wit It” inspired by Will Smith’s “Gettin’ Jiggy Wit It.” The CD is popular in foodservice settings. In fact, some managers play it as background music during work to remind employees about food safety.

“It gives me a chance to do education. I am also doing a lot more with kids and hope to make a new CD for kids,” says Winter, who reports that one particular song he is working on for the children’s CD will focus on how to pack a safe school lunch, and he has already put Van Halen’s “Jump” to new lyrics containing a plea for kids to exercise. “Schools are a great place to try songs out and get feedback,” says Winter. “I have received so many comments about how much kids love the CD. Teachers are starved for multimedia that will help them reach kids. It’s a different population than when I was a kid.” He is scheduled to perform for the National Association of Biology Teachers later this year.

Winter has created such a following in the food safety world that recently when he performed for the California Environmental Health Association, a couple, both sanitarians, approached him and said they played his CD at their wedding. The food safety CD is also a favorite at bar mitzvahs and retirement parties in the USDA crowd. Winter even performed at the Baltimore Hard Rock Café and was surprised to see the audience light up disposable lighters and sway to his music.

Winter composes his music sporadically. When he gets a good idea in his head, he can crank out a song in a few days, lyrics and all. Winter believes scientists are beginning to embrace their creative side. The Science Songwriters’ Association, an organization devoted to promoting science through song, is proof.

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**The NRAEF Takes on the Food Safety Education Challenge**

The NRAEF, home of the most widely accepted food safety program among local, state, and federal health departments known as the ServSafe Food Safety training program, offers methods of supplementing its educational training program. Randall Towns, director of product development at the NRAEF, reports that there are significant obstacles to overcome when training employees in food safety, including managing the financial bottom line of an operation, high employee turnover, and language barriers. But the NRAEF has targeted creative methods to complement food safety learning. Not only does the NRAEF ServSafe program offer computer-based, online, and blended educational formats to cover all adult learning needs, but they also offer video food safety programs that help hone in on important topics.

“The videos are designed to train managers and their employees and they include an outline for the manager to ask questions of their employees. The first five videos give employees basic knowledge of food safety. The sixth video is Take the Food Safety Challenge, which includes behind-the-scenes vignettes for employees to see good and bad practices and, based on their learning, the manager can challenge the employees to pick out the bad practices and help them apply their knowledge,” says Towns. The NRAEF also offers a set of 12 posters as part of its instructor kit with varying food safety topics designed for each month of the year that managers can post in their operation. Included are quizzes that go along with each poster theme that allow managers to challenge their employees’ knowledge.

“We get positive feedback from customers who use these tools,” says Leann Chuboff, director of science and regulatory relations at the NRAEF. She reports that other food safety activity training materials such as quizzes, activities, and posters are available through National Food Safety Education Month on the NRAEF Web site (www.nraef.org/nfsem) to download at no charge. “They are focused to the employee level and they reinforce food safety principles. People are taking advantage of the videos and posters. The number of people who use them increases each year,” adds Chuboff.

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A MUSICAL PATH TO LEARNING

Even though his music career is by no means his full-time job, Winter finds the work complementary to his post and supported by the university. He was recently awarded a USDA grant to study the effectiveness of incorporating music into existing food safety educational curricula and will publish his work soon. Although it’s too soon to report on the data, Winter notes that they look promising and believes they will give music credence in the academic community.

Even though there has been no previous research published on the effectiveness of music in educating people specifically on food safety, Winter notes that many studies have looked at using music to educate people. Music allows people to be more receptive to learning, a fact that isn’t lost in the advertising world, which has been using jingles to cement product placement in consumers’ minds for years.

“Music allows people to use different parts of their brain for learning,” adds Winter. “When you talk about food safety, people’s eyes often glaze over. Music keeps people’s interest.” Many multimedia approaches to food safety education are used, such as interactive videos for kids and adults and hands-on approaches such as the Glo-Germ hand washing activity.

“In the food handling arena, it’s a fairly mobile population. You may not keep people very long and they are trained by checklist to comply. I’m not sure that it is effective. By making it interesting and fun and getting interaction, you break down the barriers, open their minds a little bit to learning,” says Winter. “Food safety is a big tent. There are lots of creative people doing things. We can vary the content as much as possible.”

— Sharon Palmer, RD, is a contributing editor at Today’s Dietitian and a freelance food and nutrition writer in southern California.

FOOD SAFETY RESOURCES

- Carl K. Winter, PhD, Food Safety Hits
  www.foodtunes.com and http://foodsafe.ucdavis.edu
- Foodborne Illness Education Information Center
  www.nal.usda.gov/foodborne
- National Food Safety Education Month
  www.foodsafety.gov/~fsg/september.html
- National Restaurant Association Education Foundation
  www.nraef.org
- Partnership for Food Safety Education
  www.fightbac.org
- USDA Food Safety Educator
  www.fsis.usda.gov/News_&_Events/Food_Safety_Educator/index.asp