

## NORTHEAST CIDER PRODUCERS DISCUSS PROCESSING AND REGULATIONS AT CORNELL

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by Pat Blakeslee

Geneva, NY: When food scientists at Cornell University's New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY, planned a workshop on "Approved Processing Options for Safe Apple Cider Production," for February 17, they thought low attendance might be a problem. As it turned out, Randy Worobo and Olga Padilla-Zakour had to extend the workshop a second day to accommodate the nearly 70 producers who signed up.

"The workshop was intended to be a hands-on demonstration of proper sanitation steps at each point in the apple cider production as well as the different processing options currently available to cider marketers to ensure a safe and wholesome product," said Worobo, who helped test the recently approved ultraviolet light processing method. "The goal was to inform producers of proven and/or approved methods for safe cider production as well as FDA proposals that might affect their industry," he said.

Joe Corby, director of food safety and inspection at New York State Ag & Markets, opened the workshop with an overview on new regulatory initiatives. He noted that many retailers are reluctant or unwilling to buy fresh fruits and vegetables directly from growers without some kind of official inspection that certifies quality and safety. In response to this concern, a National Food Safety System is in the planning stages. Under the plan, state agencies will coordinate their inspection efforts with the FDA to allow greater coverage and minimize duplication.

Currently, most food inspection occurs at the state and local level. NYS Ag & Markets has a



Suggested caption: Dr. Randy Worobo (black and white coat) and Dr. Olga Padilla-Zakour (back turned) give attendees a demonstration in the Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Plant.

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staff of 80-90 inspectors covering approximately 30,000 establishments. Last year they conducted 200 inspections of cider facilities, licensing 182. After outlining the deficiencies inspectors encountered, Corby indicated that the cider industry has done a good job of policing itself and upgrading its sanitation. The most common critical deficiency was copper contamination introduced by brass fittings on equipment. Although the FDA has banned the use of brass fittings, NYS has adopted a wait-and-see attitude until research findings verify a need for stricter regulations.

Because consumers prefer the taste of unpasteurized juice, many producers were curious whether the FDA had approved ultraviolet exposure as a safe alternative to pasteurization. Although UV treatment does alter the taste of the cider a bit, many consider it preferable to heat treatments, which can dramatically affect taste. In the absence of an FDA ruling, New York has recognized that UV-treated cider satisfies the 5-log reduction requirement, which means cider so processed can be sold without the warning label advising consumers of the potential risks associated with consuming unpasteurized cider.

Corby also briefed the group on the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point system (HACCP). In the near future, all cider producers will likely be required to submit a HACCP plan that outlines the steps they take to monitor, document, and verify the safety of their cider-production process. Corby predicts that all food products will have a HACCP protocol. Ag & Markets is eager to help producers develop a HACCP plan. He also emphasized the important role that producers play in keeping food safe. "The government isn't going to improve food safety by itself," he said.

Padilla-Zakour and Worobo provided a hands-on demonstration of cider-production setup in the Fruit and Vegetable Processing Pilot Plant, highlighting the critical points and proper sanitation methods at every step of the process. In the afternoon, they demonstrated various processing options to achieve the mandated 5-log reduction, the role of preservatives, bottling, and storage recommendations, as well as cider evaluation and documentation procedures.

During lunch, Shelley Page, of the NY Apple Association, led a discussion on the merits of forming a cider producers' guild in New York. The group considered roles such an organization could play to support the industry, such as developing a peer certification program similar to the "Dairies of Distinction" program. Page noted that the Illinois Cider Guild has already introduced such a program.

The workshop ended with an overview of safety issues for the millenium and a taste test of cider processed using five different treatments to eliminate potential pathogens.

The workshop was co-sponsored by the NYSAES Dept. of Food Science and Technology, Cornell Cooperative Extension, the NY Apple Growers Association, and the NYS Department of Ag & Markets.

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