

SAFETY FIRST

Toronto-based F.G. Lister & Company proves its continued commitment to food safety

By Robbie Tarpley Raffish

Pick up an apple in a grocery store and your first thought is probably not “how did this produce get here?” It’s not something consumers have to think about, because the company that shipped the produce has done all the analyzing well in advance of that first bite.

At Toronto-based F.G. Lister & Company – which serves a vast cross section of customers, including national chain stores, convenience stores, national fast-food chains and independent restaurants – quality assurance is much more than a checklist or a training program. It’s an attitude that permeates the organization’s three facilities and more than 200 employees. “Our most important focus is implementation,” says Tony Arrigo, whose family has operated F.G. Lister & Company since purchasing it in 1959. “We’re the gatekeepers of food safety – what we send out has to be fresh, clean and safe every time. We train every staff member that they are the eyes of the company and it’s their job to make sure that quality is upheld at every step.”

In the late 1990s Arrigo and the Lister management team decided to formalize its commitment to quality by seeking out HACCP certification from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. In 2003 Arrigo and his quality assurance manager Mohammad Zosherafatein hit their marks. After six long years of preparation, Lister was the first produce distributor in Canada to earn the HACCP certification, a milestone celebrated by the entire company.

According to Arrigo, HACCP certification was achieved through efficient teamwork between HACCP team members and all employees. What made it possible was good communication, with almost all Lister employees aware of the HACCP certification process and the reasons for each change in policy regarding food safety. Proof of the value of that effort was quick to follow, with the company winning a 2004 Silliker Platinum Audit Award. The award recognizes food-processing facilities that receive top scores from among the thousands of audits that Silliker, one of the world’s largest food testing and auditing companies, executes annually. Judged on all aspects



Celebrating the recent Silliker Platinum Audit Award for food safety are (left to right) Mike Arrigo, partner, F.G. Lister; Greg Forster, senior account manager, Silliker Canada; Mohammad Zosherafatein, quality assurance manager, F.G. Lister; Tony Arrigo Jr., treasurer, F.G. Lister; and Nelson Robin Sr., Operations manager, F.G. Lister.

of the manufacturing process – from receiving to cold chain storage, pest control and property maintenance – the audits measure the care each location puts into food safety through both documentation and full-day site visits.

“The criteria for our food safety audits are rigorous and pervasive,” says Rena Pierami, vice-president, Division III, Silliker. “Consider all the smallest details that can be overlooked, the most seemingly insignificant steps that can be missed, and you get a sense of how hard it is to score at this highest level. Getting better

than 95 per cent is excellent; receiving a score of 98.8 per cent as Lister did is truly exceptional.”

Lister has 150,000 sq. ft. of warehouse space, with approximately 100,000 sq. ft. of that space dedicated to constantly monitored refrigerated warehouse functions. The storage bays are 60 ft. in height, making high-reach forklifts and refrigerated delivery vehicles the norm. A state-of-the-art pressurized ripening room brings bananas, avocados, citrus and other delicate products to their desired peaks of flavour and colour, and regulated temperature rooms ripen tomatoes throughout the year. Finally, the computer system customizes labels in the plant that are printed moments before the label is applied to the package to assure precise handling.

Training is crucial in ensuring the system works. Employees are each trained on food hygiene and general manufacturing processes, food safety and basic microbiology, sanitation, HACCP, CCP and job specific certifications. Because English is not the first language of the majority of staff, the company offers training in a range of languages, while providing opportunities for them to better their English. “We have to focus on the personal side of things by providing a safe, friendly environment that encourages people to learn and grow,” says Arrigo. “The Silliker Award and the HACCP certification are indications of the strength of our commitment to our staff, as well as their commitment to Lister and the ideal of total food safety.”