

# Adulterated Food

James L. Horton

Mary Tergins is a VP of PR in the Halstead agency, a boutique food marketing firm in Santa Cruz, CA. She is in charge of publicizing Bok Choy for a grower's association in Salinas Valley. Bok Choy, an oriental cabbage high in vitamin A, is a staple of Chinese diets, but the grower's association wants to make it a preferred vegetable in American cooking along with carrots, peas and broccoli.

Tergins has a background in nutrition and cooking. She is a graduate of University of California Davis Nutrition Department and of Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in San Francisco. She has spent many hours in the kitchen of the Halstead agency creating recipes with Bok Choy that her staff sends to food columns throughout the US, to chefs at the Food Network, to independent food shows and to online sites, such as Epicurious.com and allrecipes.com. Her efforts have been moderately successful. Tonnage of Bok Choy is rising although it has a long way to go before it can rival peas and carrots. The grower's association has been pleased with her efforts, and members call her "The Queen of Bok Choy."

Tergins, like everyone in the Halstead agency, keeps a Google news alert on food recalls. She was aware of a Food and Drug Administration investigation into an E. coli outbreak in Chicago that appeared soon thereafter in Indianapolis and Columbus. Twenty people had sickened, and two had died. The FDA had traced the E. coli to fresh vegetables and was trying to pinpoint the source. There had been E. coli outbreaks before, notably from Salinas Valley fresh spinach whose recall had cost one distributor alone \$18 million and its reputation for food safety. The association's Bok Choy growers had taken precautions to fence their fields against wild pigs and other feral animals that could contaminate their produce, and they were careful about water sources they used. There had been no reported problems with Bok Choy from Salinas's fields.

Tergins's attention to the recall turned to panic when the FDA tentatively identified the source of the E. coli infection to be Bok Choy from the Western US and ordered all Bok Choy grown in California and Oregon off the shelves. Tons of produce were involved and consumption of Bok Choy in the US, even of Bok Choy produced on the East Coast, went to nearly zero. The grower's association told Tergins to put the account on hold until the food recall was cleared up. Tergins ordered her staff to stop mailing recipes and story ideas and she briefed them on what to say if the media called.

Tergins was appointed spokesperson for the association and handled news interviews. She did 12 interviews over a day and a half and took three TV news teams on a tour of Salinas Valley Bok Choy fields. She pointed out the safety precautions Salinas growers had taken and the history without a recall. She

emphasized that the Bok Choy farmers would work closely with the FDA to find the cause of the contamination and remedy it. She was successful in getting the food safety message into TV news stories.

A week later, the FDA announced that Bok Choy wasn't the source of the E. coli outbreak but organic red cabbage grown in Washington State. Tergins was disgusted and the members of the association were furious. They had destroyed tons of produce and were out millions of dollars. Their reputations had been called into question, and it would take weeks to get Bok Choy back on supermarket shelves throughout the US. Some growers had already planted different crops in anticipation of a prolonged recall and wouldn't be able to provide Bok Choy for months.

Tergins convened her staff at the Halstead Agency to discuss how to make up lost ground for Bok Choy.

"I wouldn't do anything. It'll recover in time," said Bob Jellinek, a PR manager who had been through two similar recalls. "They've got to rebuild supply."

"I don't agree," said Susan Howard, "We can rehabilitate the association's reputation, build sympathy and support demand."

"How?"

"Let's get the story out there of the damage to Bok Choy, tonnage lost and what farmers have to do to get back into full production. Let's make clear how unfair the FDA was."

"The FDA wasn't unfair. It's hard to track contamination. The German recall fingered cucumbers, tomatoes and lettuce before authorities settled on bean sprouts. We don't want to be seen as criticizing the FDA," said Tergins. "I like your idea, though. Who could we get to do it?"

They discussed this for awhile and concluded that it was a local story to pitch to the *Salinas Californian*, *Monterey The Herald*, *Hollister Free Lance*, and *San Jose Mercury News*. They would approach San Francisco Bay Area TV stations but there wasn't much hope they would carry the story.

"Do we let it drop there?" Tergins was pushing for ideas.

"Why don't we go all out? A spokesperson tour with a celebrity chef, a cookbook, tastings..." Carol Kiefer was publicity oriented but not always budget conscious.

"Who is going to pay for it?" Jellinek deflated Kiefer regularly.

“Let’s not worry about that now. The question is what we should do if anything to regain momentum for Bok Choy.”

“We can go to the Chinese segment and start there,” Howard suggested.

“But they’re going to purchase anyway,” Jellinek said. “The question should be how to get beyond the Chinese market.” Howard agreed that Chinese homemakers and chefs would return to Bok Choy immediately. It was a question of availability.

“So then, how do we regain momentum among non-ethnic vegetable purchasers? Do we use an Anglo chef who demos news ways to prepare Bok Choy or a Chinese chef who shows how to serve it with hot dogs?”

This sparked discussion without a clear conclusion. The type of chef would need to be test-marketed, and it would depend on the chef’s personality. The issue of the cookbook was resolved. Halstead had a stock of 150 Bok Choy recipes, most with color photos of the final dish taken by the staff photographer. It would be easy to hire a book designer and get one produced. Tergins could do the author tour of food shows. They would use an 800- fulfillment number to merchandise the book. As for tastings, they could hire a firm and use a simple recipe for samplers to prepare. Tastings would be market by market.

Tergins hesitated to e-mail the ideas to the association. Budgets were tight, especially with the loss on the recall that would not be fully compensated by insurance. On the other hand, the association had lost ground in achieving its objective of making Bok Choy a common vegetable. Tergins considered restarting the program as it was and not pushing the association into anything new, but that would return to a slow build when there was justification for stronger action. On the other hand, doing a mini-tour to five or six markets was unlikely to affect demand for Bok Choy that much. If they were to roll out a spokesperson program, cookbook and tastings, they should go with a major budget and work through the top 25 markets. But, could Tergins justify it?

Tergins decided she would write the e-mail the following morning.

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Questions for discussion:

1. What should Tergins advise and why?
2. How would you structure a campaign for Bok Choy?
3. Was Bob correct that it was a matter of time?
4. What other ways are there to market Bok Choy that the group did not consider?

5. Does Bok Choy's reputation need rehabilitation, especially since it wasn't the source of the outbreak?