

## Do You Know Where That Berry Came From?

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By Helen Coster, Forbes

***The silver lining in food poisoning: Somebody can make a living relieving consumers' fears.***

Beginning this summer shoppers at the Wegmans flagship grocery store in Rochester, N.Y. will be able to pick up a carton of Driscoll's strawberries and use an in-store kiosk to scan a 16-digit bar code on the container. The kiosk, created by Yottamark of Redwood City, Calif., will tell shoppers about the health benefits of berries and the Driscoll's brand. Eventually, it will also reveal the name of the grower who sold the berries to Driscoll's and the day and place of their harvest.



Elliott Grant of YottaMark holding a case of traceable Foxy strawberries at Copley Ranch, operated by Camarillo Berry Farms of Salinas, Calif.

The effort is designed to make consumers feel more comfortable about the food they purchase at Wegmans, where there have been 50 recalls so far this year, up from 46 for all of 2008. "Retailers are anxious to build trust," says David Corsi, Wegmans' vice president of produce.

Food companies are under pressure to find ways to quickly trace the paths of tomatoes, melons, lettuce and other produce from farm to store after a series of food product recalls and salmonella outbreaks, including one a year ago in which tomatoes sickened 1,442 people. It's a challenge, since the products change hands many times and most outfits in the process, especially the smaller producers and packers, aren't meticulous recordkeepers.

And so we have companies popping up to help provide accountability for food vendors. Yottamark's system, called HarvestMark, is one of the first and the largest companies to offer this tracking service to producers, distributors, retailers and consumers. Its HarvestMark system already allows folks who buy produce from 40 companies to go to [harvestmark.com](http://harvestmark.com), type in the product code on any label bearing the company's butterfly-like logo and see the source of the food they're about to eat.

Elliott Grant, founder of Yottamark and its chief marketing officer, hopes his company is a step ahead of the inevitable competition. So far he is competing mainly with ibm, which collects and stores data from bar codes and from radio frequency identification tags. Yottamark's system works like this: For half a penny or less per box (the plastic container that holds Driscoll's berries, for instance), Yottamark provides growers with a tracking code, printed on the bottom. In the fields of Salinas, Calif. or any area where Driscoll's grows strawberries, a supervisor

records data about a batch--such as the crew of pickers, the date and the lot where the berries were picked--and sweeps the form with an electronic scanner. Those data get uploaded to a central server.

If there is a recall involving salmonella-tainted spinach or tomatoes produced by one of Yottamark's clients, both consumers and the companies that are in the middle will be able to see if they have any of it on their shelves.

Yottamark, created in 2004, sells its tracking software for \$20,000, on average, to companies like Del Campo Supreme, a Mexican company that produces tomatoes and peppers, and Nunes, which grows Foxy brand lettuce in Salinas. Yottamark's revenue last year: \$750,000, up from zilch the year before. Wegmans, which buys produce from 400 suppliers, is its first grocery-chain client but probably not its last. "This is not just about food safety, it's about brand differentiation," says Grant, 37.

It is also about cashing in on fear. Spurred by a series of recalls, including the 2006 salmonella outbreak that ravaged spinach growers and rattled raw-food lovers, a coalition of produce buyers, sellers, distributors and wholesalers launched a plan to create whole-chain traceability by 2012. A better tracking system is supposed to help these outfits, under pressure from the Food & Drug Administration, to trace their food. The idea is that each case of produce sold in the U.S. will eventually have two pieces of information attached: the manufacturer and lot number, which usually includes a harvest or packing date. Grocers could command a premium, maybe 10%, for traceable food.

Current rules, adopted under the Bioterrorism Act of 2002, require that farmers, packers and retailers keep track of where food comes from and where it goes in the supply chain--a system known as "one step forward and one step back." But laws don't specify how companies should maintain these records. Each business has its own system for adhering to the regulation. Small outfits often use homegrown technology. Some don't even know that they are required to trace suppliers. That is one reason foodmakers continued to issue recalls months after the FDA identified Peanut Corp. of America as the source of January's salmonella scare, which infected 691 people in 46 states.

"When the FDA says, 'I want to know what happened with this case and this lot number when it was in your facility,' in most cases today [produce companies] wouldn't know, because they don't store the information," says Gary Fleming, vice president of industry, technology, and standards for the Produce Marketing Association in Newark, Del.

Until whole-chain tracking is possible, Yottamark's HarvestMark is mostly a marketing ploy that is supposed to make food sellers and their customers feel a bit more secure. When consumers look up Driscoll's on HarvestMark's site or kiosk, they may see a picture of a smiling farmer in a well-tended field. That nice guy wouldn't sell sewage-flecked berries, would he?

There's no way, of course, for HarvestMark to know if the produce it tracks carries disease-causing bacteria or not. That's why the company and its clients are careful about how they pitch the service. Grant points out that companies that use HarvestMark shouldn't say their products are "safer." Instead, they are "traceable." "It's like the airline industry," he says. "They can't guarantee that planes won't crash."

Kenneth Harris, chief executive of consumer products and retail consulting firm Kantar Retail of Evanston, Ill., is bugged that use of these fledgling systems might indeed suggest that some suppliers or brands are safer than others. "The partnership that you make with your shopper is that the brand is safe to eat," says Harris. "It doesn't matter where you get it. It's a tomato, and it shouldn't kill you."