

Another summer and yet another major food scare

An attack of deadly cucumbers, or a case of mistaken identity?
DICK LUMSDEN tries to keep things in perspective

Last week on TV there was a movie called "Sharktopus" running on one of the satellite channels.

It was typically extreme B movie fare. A half-octopus, half-shark mutant is released by evil geneticist and wreaks havoc along the tourist coast of Mexico before impossibly good-looking scientists and their hot assistants save everyone by destroying said beastie.

So a couple of days later, on a rolling satellite TV news channel, when I started seeing references to "killer cucumbers" you can forgive me for thinking it was some kind of vegetable-based follow-up.

Killer cucumbers released by evil geneticist in Spain upon unsuspecting neighbours in Europe trigger global crisis and eventual nuclear holocaust...

But no. It was just another case of media hysteria and over-reaction like we have seen so many times before.

No doubt something, or someone, caused the outbreak of severe food poisoning in Germany. And, sadly, it has been serious enough to take the lives of some of those infected.

But a rather hasty German finger was wrongly pointed at Spanish cucumbers and the blame travelled with the speed of light. So fast in fact that I found myself watching TV footage of Spanish farmers destroying tons of cucumbers before I had even really caught up with the news of the outbreak.

The subsequent German climbdown and apology to Spain came too late to save these poor cucumbers – or to offset the loss of earnings the farmers suffered.

The finger of suspicion then turned to tomatoes, and then lettuce, and then it was basically all salad vegetables. Really?

It was quite ironic that the guy heading up the German investigation was called Reinhard Burger. Because even as he was making his announcements, TV footage of Spain's agriculture minister munching into a cucumber were beamed around the world – in much the same way as former Suffolk MP and Government minister John Gummer tucked into a burger with his four year old daughter back in 1990 to "prove" that beef was safe.

As the John Gummer episode proves, food scares are nothing new. Edwina Currie turned millions of people off eggs by



DUMPED: A Spanish worker throws away thousands of cucumbers following the e-coli scare. Left former MP John Gummer and his daughter tuck into beefburgers in 1990 to prove they were safe

All scares which were subsequently proved wrong, because each outbreak is separate and does not mean that every egg, or every T-bone steak, or every portion of soft cheese, is a potential killer.

In this latest scare, hastily labelling them "killer cucumbers" was extreme and irresponsible. But, as so often, it made for a good headline.

Sausage manufacturers will be taking out super-injunctions to prevent anyone from making reference to their on-going relationship with pork, or the brief affair they had with sage and leeks

But the stories will spread like wildfire, propelled by Tweets and re-Tweets so fast that supermarkets will be pulling

die. About a third of them die from heart disease, and almost another third from various forms of cancers.

Add in wars, accidents, natural disasters, crime, a whole list of other diseases and everything down to lightning strikes and – in perspective - the number of deaths from food poisoning each year is unfortunate, but no great surprise given the pitfalls of food hygiene and the number of evolving bacterial strains there are out there.

There is one answer though – boil everything before you eat it. Although not just any old boiling will do. Water boils at 100 degrees Centigrade, but some bacteria can withstand that, so to properly kill off bacteria, produce must be boiled under pressure at 121

European cuisine with a twist. The twist being that everything is boiled.

Boiled bread, boiled salad (of course), boiled fish, boiled meat and boiled puddings. Even the wine will be boiled.

Customers will be able to see the whole range of pressure cookers, big and small, hissing away through the glass wall into the kitchen.

No bacteria and no taste – but the food will be safe to eat. As, of course, are properly washed and prepared fresh vegetables – even in Germany.

Dick Lumsden is Managing Director of Owl Marketing Solutions, a specialist in marketing and advertising to the 50+ group. If you have any views on this article, or are