

FoodMicro 2012 (Conference)

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FoodMicro 2012 is underway here in sunny Istanbul and the organisers have dished up a veritable buffet of food science delicacies. From biotech to hygiene and safety, not to mention plenty of pathogen molecular biology, this year's FoodMicro menu has something for everyone.

I work on *Clostridium botulinum*, the proud producer of botox but also a notorious food pathogen. By forming heat-resistant spores, in combination with its potent, paralytic neurotoxin, this bacterium can spell a recipe for disaster.

Naturally, I have attended the sessions relating to food-borne pathogens. This was also the theme of today's poster session. My poster was one of about 200 on display today. With so many posters, it was easy to get lost in a sea of data and graphics. I eventually found some wonderful research on spores and made a new contact for the future, a rather successful first day.

Day two of FoodMicro, and in my programme book I have one particular talk circled and underlined. Twice. Ewelina Wachnicka's risk assessment talk on the thermal death of *C. botulinum* spores didn't disappoint. She analysed data from hundreds of studies, and condensed them into a single bite-sized nugget of information. I knew nothing about risk assessment, so her perspective was very different to mine. Her approach inadvertently gave me great insight into the methodology of the studies she examined. In spite of that, I still don't know anything about risk assessment.

The final day of FoodMicro can be summed up thusly: *Listeria monocytogenes*, probiotics, and don't ever eat any food ever. Professor Vasavada of the University of Wisconsin gave an interesting presentation on emerging food pathogens and their prevalence in (rather delicious) foods. The poster session also caught my interest today with a few studies on the use of probiotics. While I doubt my *C. botulinum* would ever be used as a probiotic, I can see this being a big talking-point at future FoodMicro meetings.

As the good Professor Vasavada mentioned today in his talk (and I'm paraphrasing this): if we ingest enough bacteria of any type, they are likely to cause disease. So, friend or foe, no bacteria have as much power and influence over our health as those found in our foods. FoodMicro 2012 is over and as I look at out over the Bosphorus, taking in the towering minarets of Istanbul, I sit here wondering... Is this kebab safe to eat?