

## **Waiting for 1:16 am on November 22**

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On November 22 at precisely 1:16 am there promises to be a significant event in our home. That's the "best before" date and time on my favourite breakfast cereal, which often makes me wonder what might happen at 1:17 am on the appointed date. Will it spontaneously disintegrate into a heap of dust, or be rendered inedible in some mysterious and catastrophic way? Of course, the answer to these questions is a resounding "No", but that still doesn't stop my imagination from entertaining these rather silly thoughts.

You may wonder why the cereal company picked 1:16 am on November 22 and not some other equally precise time on another seemingly random date. The answer is actually reasonably straight-forward. Processed foods that are sold in Canada are required to be marked or coded in such a way that manufacturers can trace these foods as the travel through the commercial food distribution chain. In this way, if a problem arises with a batch of product, it can be identified quickly and retrieved from the system, or recalled from consumers who may have purchased it. Companies must also provide information on how consumers may contact them in the event that there are questions or concerns regarding a particular product.

Canada is fortunate to have one of the best regulatory and inspection systems in the world. Sometimes, a product might inadvertently contain an ingredient that has not been declared on the ingredient line; or a potential allergen may be suspected of being present. Such events could trigger a product recall. Using the codes printed on each package, manufacturers can zero in on the product based on knowing to what area the product was shipped and through what stores it was sold.

Some processors use a numerical code which indicates the date and time at which the product was packaged. Other processors may use a "best before" date that recognizes an optimal shelf-life for the product. This date may be set at exactly six months, or nine months, or one year after the product has been packaged. Knowing that my cereal is "best before" 1:16 am on November 22 of this year would allow the cereal company to go back into their records and see what the processing conditions were at 1:16 am on the day the cereal was packaged.

My own experiences include working with "drink boxes" on a high-speed aseptic packaging system capable of turning out over two hundred packages per minute. Each sealed drink box went through a printing station before being put into cases. It was coded in such a way that we could trace the exact processing and batching conditions back to the nearest fifty quarter-litre containers. From there, we could identify the ingredients used, their suppliers, and production dates. By correlating the information

with computer print-outs of the production data, a host of other facts related to that small number of packages could also be accessed.

If you ever find a problem with a food product and wish to contact the manufacturer or distributor, be sure to provide them with the information on the package. It is generally best to send them the entire package (if this is feasible) to assist them in tracing your complaint or answering your questions. However, considering the amount of food which we purchase, we are very fortunate in that there have been very few causes for concern.