

By: [Lance Traweek](#) Reporter | January 19, 2016

A supplier of produce to New Orleans and other Gulf Coast markets is seeking its third level of certification through the Safe Quality Food Institute as it eyes expansion plans.



If approved, Baton Rouge-based Capitol City Produce said it will be the only produce supplier in Louisiana to achieve such designation from the independent third-party auditor. The company's plans come amid widespread concerns over food safety nationwide.

"The independent third party SQF certification helps to legitimize our statements about our high standards for our products," said Darin Arceneaux, chief operating officer. Capitol City Produce hopes to receive Level 3 certification by April.

Founded in 1947, the company has grown to supply produce to restaurants, casinos, hotels and supermarkets in New Orleans and other markets in Louisiana and Mississippi. It offers fresh fruits, vegetables, seasonal items, frozen products, fresh dairy products and value-added processed items.

The company currently has 27,000 square feet of warehouse space, with another 47,000 square feet in the works. Its coverage area spans as far west as Lake Charles and up north to Shreveport. It also operates across the Mississippi Gulf Coast and is structured to do business in Alabama as well.

SQF brings food safety up a notch from normal FDA standards. Recently, the FDA updated its requirements with the Food Safety Modernization Act, which brings the agency closer to SQF requirements.

SQF Level 2 focuses on food safety, while Level 3 eyes food quality. The Level 2 audit addresses the company's food safety requirements, while the Level 3 audit is a more intensive look at its quality process.

Capitol City Produce is not alone in its health-focused strategic plans.

Arceneaux noted that any mishaps can "really deteriorate a lot of brand equity."

“This could especially be harmful in the New Orleans market, where food is everything,” he said. “It’s important to our customers to know that the people they are buying their products from are reaching the highest standards possible.”

Jeff Nelken, a California-based food safety expert, agreed that adhering to new safety guidelines has become a major concern for businesses.

In April, Texas-based Blue Bell Creameries recalled all of its frozen products sold in nearly half the states after its products were potentially contaminated with listeria. And Colorado-based Chipotle will shutter nearly 2,000 North American restaurants next month after reports of consecutive outbreaks of food poisoning.

“The bacteria is always changing and morphing and getting stronger,” Nelken said. “It’s an evolution.”

Nelken said the U.S. is safer today than ever in the sense that there is more technology to access and historical experiences to build on to be better.

“From that point of view, we are a lot safer,” he said.

Nelken said he would like to see more integration between small farmers, big farmers and distributors.

“There are segments that haven’t been brought together,” he said. “We are at a time when the water and air have to be tested. We have to be sure we are doing the very best to keep the produce protected. We’re looking at how it’s picked, how it’s stored and how it’s transported.”