

FOOD SAFETY: Whose Responsibility is it?

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National headlines scream at us in both newspapers and magazines to tell of a new food safety outbreak almost daily. Some articles feature various cruise lines while others tell of ground meat or turkey products. One starts to wonder what is happening?

We think that since we live in America that our food sources are safe. But are they? Who is responsible for food safety? Is it the farmer for our produce? The livestock company for beef, poultry and pork? The United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Drug Administration, National Restaurant Association (NRA), Occupational Safety and Health Administration or is it the butcher, baker, chef, cook, server, caterer, vending machine, and manager? And don't forget to consider the food handlers in your own home?

WHAT IS BEING DONE TO ENSURE SAFE FOOD IS BEING SERVED?

Let's consider some of the facts.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimates the one in four people will get sick by contaminated food this year with 76 million people being affected. 325,000 will become ill enough to be hospitalized and 5,000 deaths will occur.

Our society wants convenience food and to eat when hungry *without waiting*. We feel that familiar hunger pang and pull into the nearest fast food drive through to satisfy our cravings. Do we just scarf our fare without concern of its origin? What about our visits to the grocery store and the purchase of prepared foods: lettuce in a bag, fresh fruit, cold cuts, sushi...: do we wash the produce or just put in the bowl? Know if any of the other food products have been time or temperature abused? And then there are all the restaurants: How large is the menu? How fresh is the product? How knowledgeable is the staff?

What are your food vendors doing to ensure you are receiving safe food? Where is the food being grown? Who is harvesting the food and what are the conditions in the field? How can the practices of the meat packing industry negatively impact your operation? Other concerns may include additives from growth hormones to antibiotics.

EDUCATING THE EMPLOYEES

(Author's note: I used to use the word training yet was informed that we train seals and educate our employees.)

Nowadays, the chef and hopefully, the manager and food & beverage director are trained in sanitary and ServSafe® Essentials (the NRA's Food Safety Program) procedures. Although I personally question whether your education program has gone far enough? Have you provided education to all the kitchen personnel, servers, snack bar outlet and buffet operators?

THE MAJOR FOOD SAFETY CONCERNS

This article will not delve into where the food has come from or what hazards it may already have be exposed to, yet we must be aware of the two main concerns for any kitchen: Time / Temperature abuse and Cross contamination.

Time / Temperature abuse – Proper heating and cooling of food as well as the proper holding of product is essential. Multiple thermometers in the freezers, refrigerators and in the pocket are required. Also knowledge of the minimum internal cooking temperatures for all food is required. They are:

Poultry	165°F
Stuffed meat	165°F
Ground meats	155°F
Injected meats	155°F
Pork, Beef, Veal and Lamb	145°F
Fish	145°F
Shell Eggs	145°F

Foods on the buffet line or reheated food have to be below/above what is considered the temperature danger zone of 41°F to 140°F where bacteria grow best.

Cross contamination - This consideration is where I am fanatical in my own kitchen. Perhaps my 25 plus years of working in private clubs with extensive kitchen experience facilitated this mania, yet I've seen too many bad work practices. Sure back in the 1970's the chef and the clam opener worked with a cigarette hanging out of their respective mouths; the eggs were always left out for a few hours to make the hollandaise; the entire box of fresh chickens were out until everything was quartered, breasted and boned; and the produce wasn't always washed. (And I'll leave the other sordid details for future articles.) Did we have fewer illnesses or were we just lucky? Maybe the fact was we just didn't know what was causing food borne illnesses.

The steps to prevent cross contamination are seemingly simple. Prepare meat, fish and poultry in a different vicinity from ready-to-eat foods and produce. Use color-

coded cutting boards and knives. Sanitize the work area before and after all tasks. Wash your hands. Use disposable towels or have a sanitizing solution for the ubiquitous kitchen towel.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

This article only scratched the surface of food safety. The initial question posed was: Who is responsible for food safety and my answer is YOU!

Additional reading and diligent work efforts will hopefully reward your operation with safe, wholesome foods and no food borne illness outbreaks!

I would like to recommend you read a food safety book titled *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser 2001. Schlosser's fast reading investigative book shares the practices that can make our food sources unsafe. If you are a voracious reader, a few other recommendations are *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair 1906; *Kitchen Confidential* and *Typhoid Mary* by Bourdain; and *Secret Agents: Menace of Emerging Infections* by Drexler.

My wishes that you and your operation are not part of the CDC's statistics.