

A look at food safety: The scrutiny of health inspections keeps restaurants safe and clean

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Abstract: Consumers are concerned with food safety, says Adams Hutt. Since 2006, they've heard much more about E. Coli 0157:

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Full text: In the kitchen at Sanaa's 8th Street Gourmet, chef and owner Sanaa Abourezk watches her three full-time and three-part employees to make sure they have washed their hands properly, and she raises an eyebrow to make sure they're telling the truth.

"They know I'm watching them every second. ... You have to be diligent," she says.

Abourezk credits her hawkish attention to cleanliness in the kitchen for her restaurant's high health score inspections. She's not quite satisfied when the score dips below a perfect 100 - she landed a 97 during an inspection in early February - but she feels OK with the score since she didn't have major mishaps.

For Sioux Falls restaurant operators, food service inspections are a test of how closely their restaurant matches food safety guidelines set by the state's department of health and enforced by the Sioux Falls Health Department. Restaurants need an 80 percent out of 100 percent to pass.

While much attention is given to the final score, restaurant operators say the inspection is more than a number. Abourezk and others say it's a check that can make their restaurant safer and help prevent a food-borne illness.

For the public, the tally sheet for restaurant inspections offers a glimpse of what's behind closed kitchen doors. And experts say to take care when trying to interpret a score - more complex kitchens have more room for error.

Minervas, for example, received an 86 percent in October and had two critical four-point violations: A cold holding unit was not functioning adequately, and the rinse cycle temperature of the dish machine was not adequate to sanitize, according to the inspection report. Management declined comment.

Health inspectors see the process as a way to protect the public and the integrity of the restaurant.

"When I'm tough on the restaurants, I hope they understand I'm protecting them from lawsuits on food-borne illness, and (I'm protecting) the general public," says Mark Schuttloffel, environmental health specialist with the City of Sioux Falls.

One frequent customer doesn't care about the health score of Minervas and his other favorite locales, such as Inca's Mexican Restaurant (received 99 percent) and Parker's Bistro (received 92 percent). "If their score was ghastly, then we'd be shocked, surprised, still loyal," says Comet Haraldson, 62, of Sioux Falls, who dines out with friends often. "We feel we would hear about it if there was a problem."

So far, diligence has helped prevent a food-borne illness in Sioux Falls within recent years. Most cities deal with it yearly, Schuttloffel says.

In South Dakota, health inspection score reports are available in a public database online. Elsewhere in the country, the score is more visible. A year ago, New York City began requiring restaurants to display a letter grade near their front entrance.

Catherine Adams Hutt, who serves as a consultant to the National Restaurant Association, calls the public display a double-edged sword. "I don't think it should be the motivation for a restaurant to do a good job and to serve safe food in a clean environment to their customers. That's a premise. If you want customers to come back, that's a rule of the game," she says.

Food safety is getting attention beyond the restaurant industry. The Food and Drug Administration Food Safety Modernization Act went into effect Jan. 1. The bill works to focus the FDA's mission on prevention. For example, it gives the FDA the authority to mandatory recall food.

Dan Roehl, public affairs specialist with the National Restaurant Association, calls the act historic. "I think this is certainly the most significant change to the FDA statute in probably decades," he says.

Consumers are concerned with food safety, says Adams Hutt. "Since 2006, they've heard much more about E. Coli 0157:H7, salmonella became much more household words than they were before the spinach outbreak, the egg outbreak. People are concerned."

About the inspections

The twice annual state-mandated visit from a health inspector comes unannounced. Restaurant operators have no chance to prepare or fix anything before an inspector enters the restaurant and peeks into cabinets, looks at shelves and opens refrigerators. The visit creates anxiety for some restaurant operators.

"Some are nervous. Some are happy to have us come in. They're almost so close they don't see it. Most are glad we're here to help," Schuttloffel says.

Randy Derheim, a partner with Pinnacle Hospitality, considers inspections more of a benchmark. The company owns Tre Lounge (received 97 percent), Foleys (95 percent) and Callaway's (91 percent).

"You can look at it two different ways. It can be punitive. You can have a lot of anxiety about it. Or you can say (they're) good at what they do, and they're going to come in and basically give us a free audit, and they're going to give us a review more thorough than we possibly could probably even think about, but we're going to use what they do as a basis for a really good operation," Derheim says.

Public health manager LuAnn Ford says that the inspections tend to be representative of what's happening in the restaurant on a daily basis. But she says some things can turn a score around for a restaurant, such as a new manager or employees.

When Schuttloffel arrives at a restaurant for an inspection, he chooses his opening words carefully. "We announce who we are, ask to see who is in charge. I try to go in with a state of, 'We're here to help you. I'm here for a look at food safety,'" he says.

Restaurant inspections should be helpful, Adams Hutt says, but there's a reason they might cause anxiety. "It really does matter to a restaurant operator that they had a successful restaurant inspection. Nobody wants to have a bad inspection. ... It's a black eye on their business, and it's a morale thing, as well. People want to have great inspections."

Faren Earring, chef at Wiley's Tavern, says he helped raise the establishment's health score 14 points. The score was an 82 percent when he arrived, and in a February inspection, Wiley's received a 96 percent.

Earring says it took him about three months to get Wiley's Tavern back into condition. He cleaned the equipment, organized food and used proper food storage to raise the score. "I don't like to get Bs and Cs. I like As," Earring says.

The scores: How clean do you have to be?

When Jayme Mothershead opened Mama's Ladas about nine years ago, she didn't know a lot about food safety.

A ServSafe course offered by the South Dakota Retailer's Association helped her learn the proper procedures. At least one person in charge at each establishment must be a certified food service manager, and the ServSafe program is one of the certified-accepted programs.

Mama's Ladas recently received a 97 percent. "It's affirming that we're doing this right," Mothershead says.

But keeping a restaurant clean, even one as small as Mama's Ladas, and managing employees is a constant battle, some restaurant owners say.

Julio Espino, who owns Inca's Mexican Restaurant and Inca's Express (received 89 percent), spends a lot of time training his employees on food safety.

"The inspectors are really, really strict about it, so it makes us be strict about handling the food," Espino says.

Behind the score: Putting places to scale

Emily Eisenhauer, 24, of Sioux Falls has looked at restaurant inspection scores online. She noticed the places she frequents, including Sanaa's 8th Street Gourmet and the downtown Kaladi's location (96 percent), had at least a 90.

Eisenhauer says she's more concerned about the overall appearance of a restaurant. "If you can see that it's dirty and gross, I would be more worried," Eisenhauer says.

When examining restaurant scores, it's important to keep in mind that some restaurants have much simpler menus and cooking procedures, Ford says.

Restaurants with a full kitchen have more complicated prep work than fast-food restaurants.

That's why some restaurants, like Spezia, which scored an 84 percent in November, may have a lower score than a Subway. Also, Ford says to keep in mind the age of the building. Some lower point violations such as structural violations don't have an effect on the food preparation, but it does on the cleaning.

And if consumers vowed to eat at restaurants above a certain inspection tier, it would limit your choices. "You'd probably end up eating at a lot of fast-food places, eating hot dogs at a convenience store rather than going out for a nice big meal," Ford says.

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City of Sioux Falls Health Scores

View health inspection scores at <http://www.siouxfalls.org/Health/scoredisclaimer.aspx>

GUIDELINES FOR INSPECTIONS

Six inspectors with the environmental division of the Sioux Falls Health Department inspect restaurants and other food facilities like grocery stores twice annually, with the exception of establishments that are only open seasonally. Restaurants also are required to pass a pre-opening inspection. Health inspectors arrive announced and grade the facility based on a checklist of 44 items. The guidelines are adopted by the state from the FDA, and are uniform within South Dakota. The FDA has empowered each state to do food inspection, and South Dakota has a contract with the City of Sioux Falls to do the inspections within the city limits, public health manager LuAnn Ford says.

Cited items are valued at different points based on the risk. Critical items, for example, are three points or higher. For example, employee hygiene including hand washing is one of the highest critical violations at five points. It's also one of the most common violations at restaurants, Ford says. Cross-contamination also is a critical violation at five points. The citations are deducted from 100 points, and facilities must score an 80 or above to pass. Inspectors complete another inspection within 30 days for facilities that score below 80. Follow-up inspections also are conducted within 10 days for any critical items not completed during the routine inspection.

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