

Keep It Cold or Keep It Hot to Keep Food Safe

Fourth article in a series about preventing foodborne illness in your dining service.

Dining Insights, Winter 2019

Prior articles in this series explained how to establish a food safety program, the importance of clean hands and sanitary facilities and use of the right tools to avoid cross-contamination.

A crucial element in ensuring food is prepared and served safely is controlling the temperatures of foods from receipt of delivery to handing a plate to a customer. It's also the most ignored element.

Magic Numbers: 41 and 135

HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points), the U.S. Food and Drug Administration program adopted and en-forced by most state and local health departments, prescribes a simple formula:

Keep foods at or above 135°F or at or below 41°F. Foods that have been held between these two limits for two or more hours should not be served. The risk of undetectable growth of dangerous microbes that flourish in that range, contaminating the product, is too great.

Simple Procedures

Cost-conscious managers and chefs recoil at the idea of discarding apparently good food. They don't have to throw food away if they follow the simple basic steps to control food temperatures. Nearly all fresh foods need to be kept cold to retard the growth of microbes, present on nearly all raw foods. (Cold retards microbes' growth; heat kills them.)

- Fresh and frozen products must be transferred from the delivery truck tailgate to the refrigerator or freezer within minutes.
- The refrigerators and freezers need to be cleaned and arranged to receive deliveries on the preceding day. (Most food deliveries are in the morning.) A designated receiver, and maybe a helper, should be free of other duties when deliveries are due.

Handling Cold Foods

- Foods served raw – salad greens, fruits – should be rinsed in cold water to remove microbes and dirt. Rough-skin fruits like cantaloupes need to be scrubbed with a brush. When unwashed fruit is cut, the knife carries the pollutants into the flesh.
- Salad bar containers should be chilled in the refrigerator before being filled and set out, then nestled into a bed of crushed ice. Cold doesn't rise. Dishes placed on top of, not in, the ice bed won't stay cold.

Handling Hot Foods

- Once foods are brought into the kitchen for meal production, pre-cooking prep should be completed as quickly as possible. When foods have been cooked, they should be maintained at or above the 135 F limit.
- Since many hot foods don't improve while being held, production schedules should be planned with a just-in-time focus.

What do your dining service managers and team know about keeping food safe?

Give them our 10-question quiz to find out.

- Soups and stew-type meals can be prepared first; schedule more perishable dishes to come out of the oven and into the servery station just before the first customers arrive.

Maintaining Temps

How do you know whether hot foods stay hot and cold foods stay cold? Check.

HACCP procedures call for checking temperatures periodically during preparation and service, especially self-service foods that may be out for up to two hours. While that's the official limit, it's safer to consider less time, maybe 90 minutes, as the limit for foods to be at an unsafe temperature. You don't know how foods were handled before they came in your door.

A "blast chiller" solves the problem of excessive waste. It's used to bring food temperatures down to the safe zone quickly, saving the product for future reuse.

Food Safety Quiz

How much do your dining service manager and staff know about food safety? Have them take our 10-question quiz. It's available free, with instructions and an answer page on request to info@clariongp.com.

Clarion assesses food safety procedures when we evaluate your dining and hospitality services. To learn how we can benefit your services, call Tom Mac Dermott, 603/642-8011 or Ted Mayer, 617/875-7882 or e-mail us at info@clariongp.com.