

How to Avoid Being the Next Chipotle

How well is your dining service following food safety practices?

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First in a series of articles about how to keep your dining services safe from foodborne illness.

The management of the Chipotle restaurant chain, proud that they served “food with integrity”, undoubtedly never dreamed they also serve food with e-coli. But that’s what they did, along with gastrointestinal norovirus, at restaurants all over the country last year.

Some of the illnesses were blamed on tainted produce bought from local farms. But health authorities traced more than a few outbreaks to unsafe food handling practices in the restaurants. As a result, the chain’s reputation, sales and stock price dropped precipitously and haven’t yet recovered.

It Can Happen Here

Just as Chipotle management assumed a food-borne illness “can’t happen here,” so do many on-site dining service managers. And most often it doesn’t happen, even when food handling practices are appalling.

An outbreak of food-borne illness, like a lightning strike, can’t be predicted and isn’t frequent at any one location, but when it does strike, the effects can be devastating – sick employees or students (and sometimes deaths), bad publicity, lost productivity and expensive legal consequences.

Reducing the Risk

The precautions needed to reduce the risk of sickening customers are not complex, but need to become an integral part of every step in the process of serving a meal, from the original source to putting food on the diner’s plate.

The system for ensuring safe food handling practices is called Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (“HACCP”), originally developed to ensure the safety of foods sent into space with the astronauts. It has been adopted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for food production, the Food and Drug Administration for its inspections and by most state and local health departments as the standard for restaurant and dining service operations.

Establishing HACCP

Creating a HACCP plan takes seven steps:

1. Conduct an analysis of food safety risks and identify the preventive measures that will control the risks or “hazards”.
2. Identify the “critical control points” in the receiving, storing, handling, preparation and service of foods where preventive measures are best applied.
3. Establish “critical limits” – the maximum and minimum limits to which a hazard must be controlled.

FDA Asks Higher Budget to Fight ‘Cascade of Contaminated Foods’

“A cascade of contaminated food incidents . . . such as bacterial contamination of fresh fruits and vegetables and illegal antibiotics in seafood, has resulted in public distrust of imported food,” the Food and Drug Administration said in requesting an increase in its fiscal 2017 food safety budget by \$25.3 million to \$1 billion.

The FDA’s funds, along with the rest of the administration’s FY 2017 budget, are subject to Congressional approval.

4. Monitor the critical control points to ensure safe handling practices are used.
5. Establish corrective actions when safety limits are breached. Discarding potentially dangerous foods is the usual step.
6. Verify the plan as developed will work. This includes the key to success – training the staff in safe food handling practices.
7. Maintain records, primarily temperature logs of refrigeration units and of foods during preparation and serviced.

Training's the Key

It's Step 6 that makes a HACCP plan work. If your dining service personnel don't know how to safely handle food – and why they should be doing it in a certain way – then all the rest of the process is wasted.

Clarion can tell you how well HACCP, as well as the overall operation, is working at your dining center and help improve both service and quality along with the food safety program. For information, contact Tom Mac Dermott, 603/642-8011 or e-mail us at info@clariongp.com