

Toughest Part of Your Job



Food Safety

for Franchised Restaurants

By Steve Burns

Foodservice franchisees must always put food safety first. This isn't just the right thing to do—it's also good business.

In 2008 alone, we witnessed several high-profile outbreaks of foodborne illness, including melamine poisoning from Chinese-produced products such as candy, coffee and tea; *salmonella* found in tomatoes and peppers; *E. coli* found in meat and other products; and the listeria outbreak, in which 20 Canadians died and hundreds more were sickened after eating tainted deli meats and soft cheeses from a Maple Leaf Foods processing plant. At the time of writing, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) are engaged in one of North America's largest-ever food recalls, after linking *salmonella* to peanuts processed in a U.S. plant. The CFIA has already recalled more than 120 products.

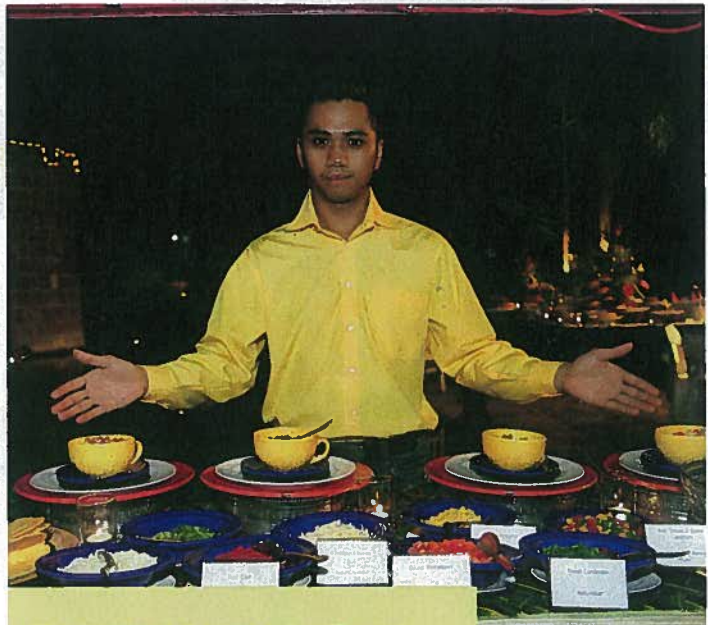
Franchisees, not franchisors, are the ones held responsible for food safety problems at the unit level.

Tomatoes, milk, meat and nuts are part of almost every restaurant franchisee's menu. As a business owner, it's your responsibility to minimize the chance of foodborne illnesses beginning in your location. When outbreaks do occur, you must be able to adapt your procedures, answer customers' questions and calm their fears.

Dealing with the public

Swift action by you, your managers and employees can maintain, or even increase, your customers' confidence during foodborne illness situations. Preparation will help. Here's what you can do before anything goes wrong.

1. Designate a crisis management team to develop your outbreak response strategy. Only one person should be in charge of communicating with the public.
2. Brainstorm to identify possible foodborne illness risks. Encourage your team to think creatively and stay informed.
3. During an outbreak, the suspect food must be immediately removed from your inventory; public health officials must be contacted and any employees suspected of contaminating food must be prevented from handling it. To ensure these steps are taken immediately, write out simple instructions for your employees and put them in an easy-to-find place in your restaurant.
4. Post an emergency contact list by the staff telephone. This will include numbers for your local health unit, the police and fire departments, the local poison control centre and your own phone number, which employees should feel free to call in an emergency.
5. Set up response protocols. Foodborne illness outbreaks are highly publicized and can make your customers fearful, stressed or perhaps even paranoid. Good communication is essential to maintain their trust. Your employee's responses to customer questions should be honest, succinct, empathetic and consistent. If the customer is not satisfied, he or she should be given the chance to speak with your manager or even you. Most customers will respect you for putting their safety first.
6. 'If in doubt, find out.' You may need to seek expert advice relating to public relations, laboratory testing and crisis management. If this is the case, it should be attended to quickly.



When it comes to the storage, handling and preparation of food, knowledge is everything. As a franchisee, you will be expected to take the initiative in educating your employees.

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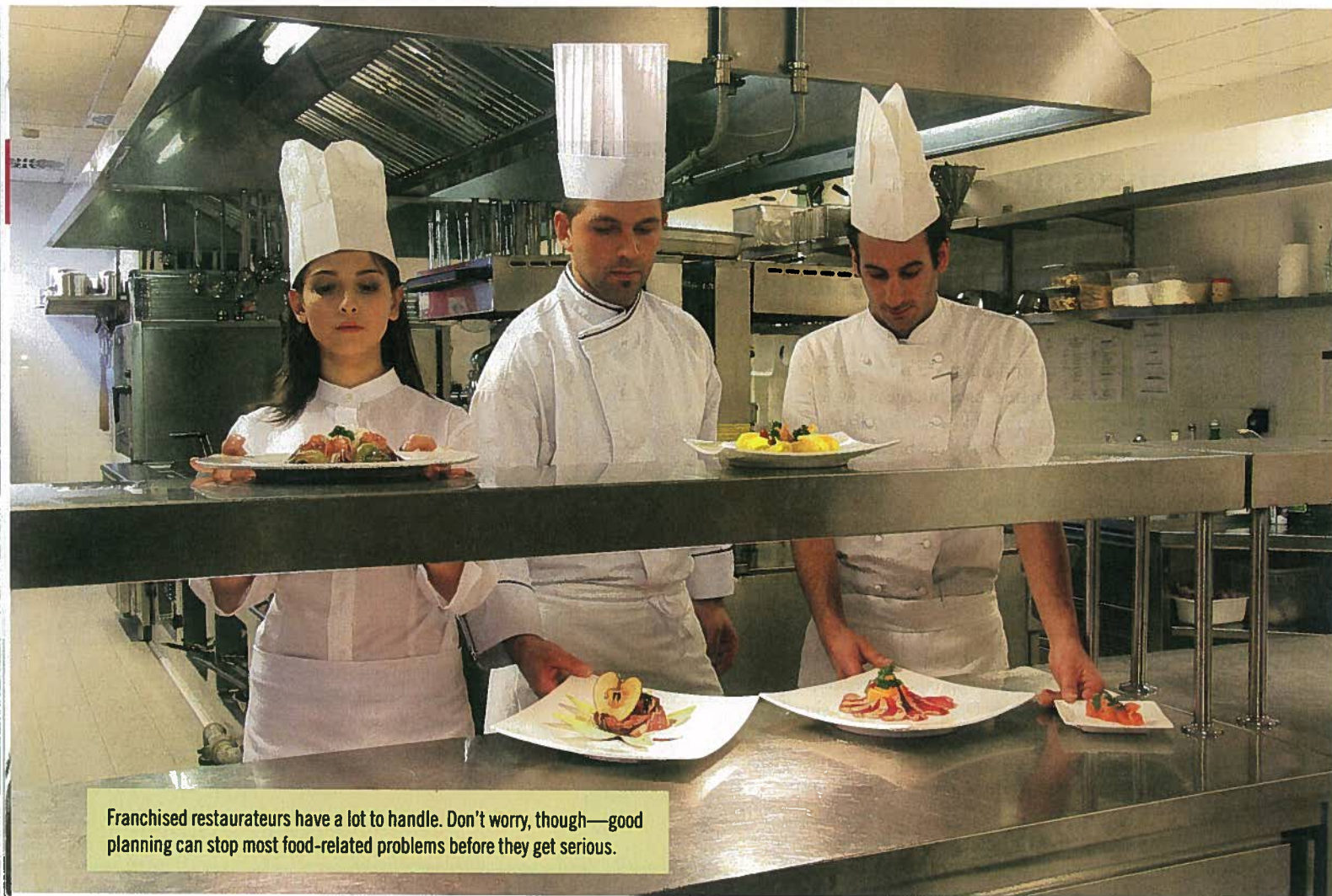
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Franchised restaurateurs have a lot to handle. Don't worry, though—good planning can stop most food-related problems before they get serious.

What do health authorities expect you to know?

Many provinces and municipalities require food safety certification for restaurant managers and supervisors, though some only require food handlers to be certified. This makes it difficult for a large franchisor to maintain uniform standards across the country. This is also why franchisors are not required to have their food safety training methods approved by the government.

Franchisors are rarely held responsible for food safety problems at the unit level, anyway. However, your local public health unit (PHU) will expect you and your managers to know about many aspects of food safety, including:

- The disease-causing agents transmitted by food, along with some knowledge of food allergies;
- The 'flow of food' within your operation, from receiving the food to serving it. This includes knowing where hazards can be prevented or at least mitigated, and how well your procedures meet the requirements of local legislation;
- The relationship between personal hygiene and the spread of disease, especially concerning cross-contamination and hand contact with ready-to-eat foods;

- How to keep injured or ill employees from contaminating food or food-contact surfaces;
- Safe cooking temperatures and preparation times for potentially hazardous foods, such as meat, poultry, eggs and fish;
- Proper temperatures and holding times for refrigerated foods, holding cooked foods, cooling cooked foods and reheating potentially hazardous foods;
- Correct procedures for cleaning and sanitizing utensils and food-contact surfaces;
- The types and purposes of various poisonous materials you use in the course of business; and how to safely store, dispense, use and dispose of them;
- The adequacy of your equipment for a given task, as well as its operating procedures and proper maintenance;
- The source of your water supply (whether bottled, municipally supplied or well-drawn) and how to keep it clean and safe, both for consumption and for cleaning equipment and utensils; and
- The rights, responsibilities and authority local legislation assigns to you, your restaurant's management, your staff and the local health department.

Base your food safety system on your specific workplace needs.

This list is long, but up-to-date knowledge is necessary to avoid problems. To achieve best practices in the workplace, your food safety system should be based on your specific workplace needs and formatted in a logical format that is easy to implement, manage and maintain.

Training is a must

Most foodservice franchisors recognize the role a comprehensive food safety program plays in protecting their brand(s). Some have certified and registered food safety instructors on staff to train franchisees, while others outsource to third-party training companies. Franchisees should begin training in the basics of food safety well before they open for business, and perhaps continue training on an ongoing basis.

Many franchisors audit franchisee's businesses to ensure they are in compliance with both the franchisor's standards and provincial and municipal regulations. Again, this may be done by the franchisor's own people or through a third party.

If all else fails, train yourself

Unfortunately, some franchisors will provide you with only basic food safety training. If your knowledge is inadequate to prevent foodborne illness, you must address the problem yourself. Here are some tips:



Your concern for customers builds loyalty that can last a lifetime.
Bon appetit!

1. Review the training materials your franchisor has provided and make sure they cover everything health authorities expect you to know.
2. If the franchisor does not offer a government-approved food safety training course, take a course on your own. Your local PHU can advise you about the certification requirements in your province or municipality. It may even put you in touch with instructors. Upon passing a certification exam, you will be registered in a government database, though your certificate may expire after a set time. Once it does expire, you will have to rewrite the exam.
3. Research local, third-party training services. Many private-sector trainers have hands-on industry experience and may be more open to discussing sensitive operating issues than government employees would be. Only consider trainers who are accredited food safety specialists with a background in your part of the foodservice industry. They should offer a complete suite of services, including an operating needs assessment; assistance with refinement, development and implementation of operating programs, systems and controls; and various education, training and certification programs. They should also perform periodic audits to ensure you are maintaining best practices at the unit level.
4. Make food safety training part of your staff meetings, using the course materials provided in all your training courses to reinforce operating practices. A particularly useful resource is the Food Safety Code of Practice, published by the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservice Association (CRFA).

You're ready to serve

Food safety is a must for all restaurateurs—the only question is how you'll make it happen. Whatever route you choose, a practical, hands-on approach that meets or exceeds regulatory requirements will ensure best practices are achieved in your franchised workplace. **fe**



For most people, safety starts at home. For restaurateurs, it begins at work.



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