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INSIDE:
2009 ORHMA Golf Guide

hosting

SECURING SAFETY

Ways to Make Your Workplace Healthy

9 Is Your Kitchen Food Safe?
Reduce waste, risk and costs

12 Homegrown on the Menu

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Food Safety Pays Off



Reduced waste, reduced risk and reduced costs are among the benefits of good food handling practices

Is there a week that passes without a new story regarding food contamination? Over the past few years, food safety seems increasingly to be on the minds of the North American public and media, with outbreaks of potentially lethal pathogens in meats, fresh produce and prepared foods at all levels of the food supply chain. Most recently, there have been alerts about possible salmonella contamination of peanut products from the U.S. and alfalfa sprouts from Nebraska. Canadian health authorities have issued warnings about the possible presence of Listeria in egg salad from several different producers.

It seems no establishment is immune.

In early March, chef Heston Blumenthal, known by some as “the Pope of Molecular Gastronomy,” closed the kitchens at his renowned restaurant The Fat Duck, located west of London, England. Why? The three-Michelin-star eatery, which was actually named as the world’s top dining establishment in the 2005 edition of the World’s 50 Best Restaurant Awards, received 400 complaints in one week from diners who had taken ill. The lesson? No one in the food service industry can afford to relax their guard when it comes to food safety.

No one is more aware of this than Iain Stewart, senior vice president for Food Safety and Transformation with Maple Leaf Foods. His company has been in the spotlight since it was linked with a Listeriosis outbreak in the summer of 2008. Since that time, Maple Leaf has doubled the amount of testing in its plants and subjected its equipment to even more rigorous deep cleaning. Part of the challenge for anyone involved in food handling, Stewart says, stems from the fact that most industry professionals are generally aware of food safety risks and

believe they are already taking sufficient steps to avoid them.

“The change for us has been that we believe Listeria — and other pathogens — are ubiquitous. It’s everywhere in a kitchen or a facility, and our job is to keep it out of the food,” he says. “What that has done for us is keep us vigilant. It’s made our people realize this is a long journey. Our practices before would have been best in Canada, and we have dramatically changed them to be better. Six months from now we will have improved them even more.”

In the case of Maple Leaf, “we believe the outbreak came from slicers that were difficult to clean,” he says. “We’ve changed slicers; we’ve redesigned and refurbished them to make them easier to clean. As we have looked at all of our equipment, we are finding areas that could be improved, and we are actually going back to our manufacturers and working with them to fix it.”

Even a small kitchen can benefit by taking a closer look at all its food preparation areas and equipment. “Walk through your

kitchen with new eyes; you should be looking at the equipment to find places where bacteria could grow or could be harboured,” Stewart says. “I think if folks did that they might be surprised at what they saw. We certainly were.”

“Lives are in your hands,” says Steve Burns, president of Surety Food Safety Group, a one-stop food safety consultancy for manufacturers, distributors, food retailers and food service outlets. “The food handler is the last line of defense for food safety, and if they contaminate the food, then all the other good operating practices all the way down the line are wasted.”

Burns says he believes that the incidence of outbreaks has not risen, but media coverage has. Consequently, “the change in the marketplace is that now there is an urgent need for brand protection,” he says, pointing out that a problem at just one single outlet can tarnish the reputation of an entire corporation.

“We need to educate and train people on how to handle food safely and properly in their job, whether they are a cook, a server or a dishwasher,” he says. “Food service operators have high turnover, so the mindset may be: why should I train my people? They’re only going to leave. But what if you don’t train them, and they stay?”

Surety Food Safety Group handles a great deal of workplace training, and Burns has found that “one of the most difficult challenges is changing peoples habits. For instance, everyone knows they should wash their hands before and after handling food, but in order for hand-washing to be effective, you need more than body-temperature water, as hot as you can stand, and you need to lather your hands with a hand soap for at least 20 seconds,” he says. “Also, there’s a false sense of security when wearing disposable gloves. They’re a great barrier if you have a cut, a burn or an abrasion, however the glove becomes contaminated, as will your hands, therefore gloves must be changed frequently with proper hand washing before and after use.”



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“If I had to pick one thing that I think is important for folks, it would be the education around the why we’re asking employees to do something, as opposed to just the how we want them to do it,” says Stewart. “The why is that there are food-borne pathogens that can be carried by food or by gloves. The why is that you’re trying to prevent transfer and avoid cross-contamination. It can be as simple as, in a kitchen, don’t move from a raw area to an area where you might be making ready-to-eat elements like sandwiches.”

Burns enumerates the three most common problems, beginning with inefficiency in food and workflow patterns. “From receiving to service, food should constantly move in a forward direction to reduce the risk of cross-contamination,” he says. “In a lot of establishments, food is criss-crossing all over the workplace — there’s more possibility of food becoming contaminated, and workplace accidents.” Also, he says, “People know food must be kept six inches off the floor. If you also keep it two inches away from the wall, it saves you tons of money in refrigeration costs.”

The second potentially risky area is improper temperature controls. (“an accurate thermometer in a fridge and freezer can also save you hundreds of dollars”), while the third is proper storage of both raw and prepared foods. Furthermore, Burns notes, “Ontario has seven public health regions; some with local regulations requiring mandatory certification of food handlers while others do not. If you’re a multi-unit operator, there’s a great deal of inconsistency. An owner-operator should establish their own standards that meet or exceed the minimum requirements.”

Surety Food Safety Group can help in this regard. They offer a full range of food safety services, such as needs assessments, education and training programs, system development and implementation and auditing services. The company is also facilitating throughout Ontario a series of free food safety information forums in alliance with the ORHMA. They have a free self-inspection

checklist that can be downloaded from their website at www.suretygroup.net as well as a food safety self-audit kit that can be purchased.

After implementing the changes suggested in a thorough food safety audit, an operator can save “between 1.5 and 2 per cent in food, labour and energy costs, and — depending on the insur-

ance carrier — a reduction in insurance costs, because you have reduced risk,” says Burns. “Good food safety practices reduce costs. I understand the dilemma of the food operator — they’re all struggling to cut costs these days — but they have to view food safety as an investment in the preservation of their assets. Food safety pays.” ■

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