Basic Principles.

Food Safety in the Hospitality Industry.

An estimated 600 million people fall ill from contaminated food every year and the hospitality industry has its part to play to bring these numbers down. With hotels and restaurants now reopening after lock-downs with strict regulations in place, health and safety (including food safety) is top of the agenda. Here, we outline some of the most important measures hospitality businesses should have in place to avoid the spread of bacteria.

Every year around 600 million people fall ill and over 400,000 die from food-borne illnesses like salmonella and norovirus. In Australia alone, there are 5.4 million cases annually, costing the country AUD$1.2 billion, while the U.S. sees 48 million people become ill and 3,000 die from ingesting food contaminated with bacteria or other pathogens such as parasites or viruses on a yearly basis. In Europe too, food-borne illnesses are a significant problem. More than 23 million people become ill and an estimated 4,700 die every year, according to data from the WHO. While the hospitality industry is by no means the only culprit, it does have its part to play to bring these numbers down. Providing guests a safe dining experience has become an even higher priority now due to the COVID-19 -crisis. However, food safety measures are only a small part of comprehensive concepts currently being rolled out to protect guests' and food workers' health and well-being.

When assessing risks throughout your hotel facilities, kitchens are not the only area of real risk to be considered. Potential food borne risks may be found in other areas of your business such as room service, snack areas or even mini bars. Furthermore, food safety is not just an issue to be addressed within your own operation, it should be thoroughly discussed and aligned across all your vendors and partners handling food.

Besides the consequences for customers being infected with foodborne illnesses and the financial damages this causes for the industry as a whole, one should never forget the cost of an outbreak for an individual business. Fines and lost profit are just one side of the coin, the most serious damage for the business is to its reputation. The five-star Langham Hotel in Melbourne, for example, hosted the 'High Tea from Hell' in 2015 when 86 diners fell ill with salmonella infections. Incidents harm the reputation, and put a business into jeopardy. Social media has torn down geographical barriers, news today travels around the globe in an instant and can stay online forever.

Basic principles for ensuring food safety in your operation

So, how can you minimize operational risk? Often it's the simplest things that can make the biggest difference. In the case of food safety, a huge number of reported illnesses and deaths could have been prevented by something as simple as staff members remembering to wash their hands. Due to COVID-19, the importance of handwashing as an effective and affordable way to prevent diseases and save lives has been emphasized along with cleaning and sanitizing protocols. A recent study from The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare proves a positive effect of those measures on the number of food-borne infections in Finland. But of course, it's not as simple as that and there are strict food safety laws to comply with, which differ between countries.

In general, food safety concepts are based on the principles of HACCP (hazard analysis and critical control points) that aim to prevent food safety issues before they occur. Another international standard that incorporates the principles of HACCP is ISO 22000, which aims to define the food safety requirements a company needs to meet and includes additional requirements not covered in HACCP, such as allergen control.
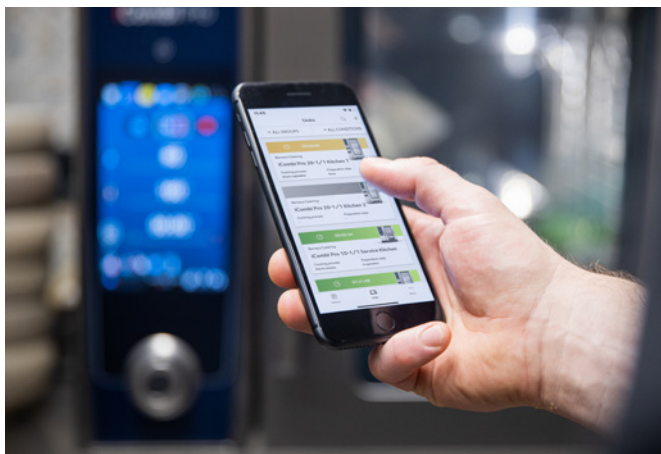
Preventing cross contamination

Cross contamination is one of the most common causes of food poisoning and occurs if raw foods come into contact with ready-to-eat foods. It can be avoided by measures such as: storing raw meat, poultry and seafood separately from ready-to-eat foods, using a separate chopping board for raw food and ready-to-eat food; replacing chopping boards before they become scratched or damaged; and implementing a personal hygiene program – including handwashing, glove use and work attire – to lessen the possibility of food handlers contaminating ready-to-eat food.

Temperature control

Understanding the temperature requirements for different foods is absolutely key to maintaining food safety. Different foods have different temperature requirements for chilling, freezing, heating and storing, with high-risk foods like meat, dairy, seafood and eggs subject to the strictest rules. As a general rule the temperature danger zone is between 5˚C and 60˚C (41° F and 140°F) – that's when bacteria grows the most quickly. Network technology like RATIONAL's ConnectedCooking system –whereby sensors can be installed at HACCP checkpoints and temperature data transferred automatically into an online hygiene management system – can make the temperature checking process quicker, easier and more reliable.

Safety checks

It is essential that management and staff do certain checks every time a hotel kitchen opens and closes. These should include: making sure fridges, chilled display equipment and freezers are working properly; ensuring staff are fit for work and wearing clean work clothes; and confirming that food preparation areas are clean and disinfected and there are plenty of handwashing and cleaning materials available.

Workplace illness policy

In recent years, many foodborne illness outbreaks linked to hotels have been identified as starting with a food handler who worked while ill. Norovirus, which is highly contagious, can be spread easily when workers who are sick handle food and beverages. Make sure that the staff understand the threat that an ill food handler poses to guests, co-workers and to the entire operation. Becoming a superspreader has to be avoided at all costs.

Positive food safety culture

Without proper staff training on a regular basis and a positive food safety culture, even the most thorough food safety program will not be effective. According to the Australian Institute of Food Safety a commitment to food safety must be incorporated into your day-to-day operations, not just something you discuss at

a weekly meeting. Their advice is to make it personal, for example by explaining the risks of non-compliance to staff members and holding them accountable for following procedures but also focusing on how they will benefit by doing the right thing.

Conclusion

Having a robust food safety program in place that includes a risk analysis, HACCP conformity, staff training and the commitment of every single staff member is key to safeguard your business. For larger operations and chain business third-party assessments are recommended in addition. By taking these proactive steps, your hotel is setup for success to ensure guests have a stay that is memorable for all the right reasons.

Want to know more?

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