



Hygiene rating must be fair

A week after Yo! Sushi was forced to respond to media claims over its hygiene standards, *Stuart Knill*, food safety manager at stocktaking firm Venners, says the proposed "scores on the doors" must be fair

We welcome the review of the "scores on the doors" scheme by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), but it must bear in mind the consequences for restaurants.

Everyone likes to get accolades for their work, especially if they are commended for their standards. But is it fair, after a site has been inspected, been found wanting and has corrected any areas of concern, that the business then has to wait a considerable time – up to 18 months or two years is proposed – to have that recognised?

Being recognised for improvements in a timely fashion would surely motivate it to raise standards quickly.

Equally, a restaurant could be awarded a high grade at the time an inspection is done, but in reality it does not live up to the award given because the ownership, management or cleaning regime has changed for the worse. In both instances, the public is misinformed.

In an ideal world, local authorities would be working closely with sites and would revisit on a regular basis. To do this, though, is a costly exercise.

Whatever the FSA decides to do, the scheme has to be fair, with clear pathways for sites to achieve nationally recognised criteria, showing clearly where they can improve or maintain set standards.

In my experience, the criteria vary and are often bewildering to operators that have a national spread of sites.

We know there will always be hygiene shortfalls, and restaurants need to be motivated to maintain standards, but the FSA needs to ensure that when an inspection has taken place there are clear guidelines to help the site improve. It also needs to ensure that the site is reinspected within a sensible period of time.

So as to not penalise those outlets that had a good original



Yo! Sushi suffered a PR blow when hygiene grades awarded by local environmental health officers were analysed by a national newspaper

rating or those that have made the necessary improvements between inspections, perhaps the award given should be weighted to reflect both the original and subsequent findings.

The details and score of each inspection could be communicated through websites, thereby motivating and rewarding improvement across the industry.

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Over to you

What is the worst hygiene you have witnessed?

Robert Kirby, chef-director, Lexington

"Many years ago, when I was working as a young chef in a notable hotel in the Middle East, I used to open the hotplate door whereupon 1in-long flying cockroaches would square me up before launching at me."

Gordon Jones, head chef, Royal Crescent hotel, Bath

"I worked in an Indian restaurant in Scotland when I was 14 and the chefs would smoke all the time while they were cooking over the tandoori oven. It was pretty common practice back then, and some ash probably fell into the food. The kitchen staff also used to wash their feet for prayer time in the potwash area. Still, the food was always great."

Ben Bartlett, catering development manager, Marston's

"There are two places that spring to mind, because I had to shut them down. The first was mixing raw meat with cooked meat. I told them I was going to close them down and they didn't believe it until the environmental health showed up. The other site had vermin eating food out of the fridge."

Chris Rouse, senior director, CBRE Hotels

"I was dining in a rather fancy but short-lived restaurant in Berkeley Square about six or seven years ago when a rather speedy mouse ran out from under our table. When we complained we were told that 'vermin' was a problem of the building, which we found quite difficult to believe. We made our excuses and left."