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TASTE OF CHICAGO 2007 VENDORS FAIL INSPECTIONS

Restaurants accumulate violations during onsite CDPH visits

CHICAGO, Ill.—The City of Chicago is currently preparing for large crowds at 2008's Taste of Chicago. But what these crowds don't know just might hurt them. The answer lies in data in last year's public health records analyzed by *The Chicago Reporter*.

Ten people are expected to file separate lawsuits today, a day before the opening of the 2008 Taste of Chicago festival, after they reported becoming ill with salmonella poisoning at last year's event, according to the plaintiffs' attorney Rich Ruohonen.

In 2007, 790 reported got sick with salmonella heidelberg—a common form of salmonella poisoning—after eating hummus dishes served at the Pars Cove booth during the Taste. By choice, the restaurant will not participate in this year's event, said manager Mike Bambouynai. Inspection records from last year's event were withheld from *The Chicago Reporter* due to ongoing litigation, according to a spokesman from the Chicago Department of Public Health. But a Reporter investigation shows that Pars Cove isn't the only vendor from last year's event that may have improperly handled food.

An investigation by the *Reporter* found that more than 85 percent of the 67 food vendors at last year's Taste received violations during onsite inspections by the Chicago Department of Public Health.

At the 2007 Taste of Chicago:

- Of the 57 vendors with violations, the average number of violations per restaurant was four
- Nearly 40 percent of all violations occurred during the first three days of the festival
- 790 people reported becoming ill, some with Salmonella Heidelberg, after eating hummus at the Pars Cove booth
- Star of Siam was received a violation for storing a container of open vinegar next to a container of bleach
- La Justicia was cited for storing enchilada sauce in a container that read "dish soap"
- Noodle Thai Cuisine had the most violations, at least one on each day of the 10-day festival

What the experts are saying

According to Frances Guichard, director of the Food Protection Program for the Chicago

Department of Public Health, these violations are a serious issue that health officials carefully look for every two or three hours while inspecting each booth.

“People shouldn’t be concerned with eating at the Taste,” said Jennifer Hefferly, spokeswoman for the Illinois Restaurant Association. “Most restaurants are only inspected twice a year. Each booth at the Taste is checked [at least] twice a day.”

Lawsuits

The 10 plaintiffs who are filing lawsuits are among the 191 people confirmed to have cases of salmonella traced back to contaminated hummus prepared at the Pars Cove booth in 2007, Ruohonen said. The Chicago Department of Public Health found no hazardous conditions at the booth in the days following the initial salmonella complaints, according to a report commissioned by the U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and conducted by the city public health department. An inspection of the restaurant several days following the culmination of the Taste revealed “critical violations related to failure to maintain proper temperature of a cooler and a potentially hazardous food item being held at an improper temperature,” according to the report. The improper heating and cooling may have allowed the bacteria to survive, Ruohonen said.

For the full story, photos, video and other extras visit www.chicagoreporter.com

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