

Most restaurant inspections now posted on the Web

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Are you intrigued but a little worried about that hole-in-the wall sandwich shop next to the vacant lot? Or perhaps you're wondering whether the fancy new restaurant in the strip mall has mouse droppings hidden beneath the glitz?

Most food establishments don't publicize even their most positive inspection reports, and no government in the Philadelphia region requires that they be tacked up for easy viewing like a menu.

But more are going online. With the new Camden County database that went live Thursday night, the outcome of inspections are now posted for the vast majority of restaurants in the eight-county region.

Philadelphia and Bucks, Montgomery and Camden Counties post the actual inspection reports - complete with comments and compliance for dozens of categories - in searchable databases that often contain previous inspections and explanations of the findings.

All are linked at <http://go.philly.com/inspect/>

"Who doesn't want to know what their children's cafeteria looks like?" said Carmen G. Rodriguez, the freeholder liaison to the Health Department in Camden County, whose new Web site, like those in the other counties, includes schools.

Still, interpreting the regulatory language of inspection reports for what patrons really want to ask - Is this a safe place to eat? - takes time and patience.

"Cross-contamination and hand-washing violations and temperatures," thorough cooking, hot foods kept hot and cold foods kept cold - these are the most important risk factors for food-borne illness, said Ben Chapman, a food-safety specialist at North Carolina State University. Dirty bathrooms matter less.

Chapman, who reviewed the new Camden County Web site at The Inquirer's request, was impressed that the posted reports include the temperatures of various foods found by the inspector - along with the inspector's comments, which are necessary to make sense of the numbers.

Here is an inspector's report, written six weeks ago, in giving a conditionally satisfactory rating to Plaza Pizza & Sub Shop in Cherry Hill: "Potentially hazardous food stored in the saute station bain marie was not maintained at refrigeration temperatures below 41F. Observed provolone cheese at 48F, peppers 49F, sliced mushroom 48F, sauteed onions at 49F, and vegetables 48F. The contents of this cold holding unit were moved to the main reach-in refrigerator."

Owner Moises Garcia Lopez said Thursday that the violations had been fixed and that he was awaiting a reinspection, which he expected to yield a satisfactory rating.

Camden County, which delayed making its site public until 75 percent of its 3,500 food establishments had been inspected at least once, is the first in New Jersey to post full reports online, said Ralph Green, the county's director of environmental health.

Burlington and Gloucester Counties post only the inspection status - satisfactory, conditionally satisfactory, unsatisfactory - in one-line listings.

Across the river, every county is different. Full reports are posted by Philadelphia and Bucks County - they highlight critical violations in red - and by Montgomery County, which offers Google maps. (Camden County will send an e-mail when a designated restaurant or cafeteria is inspected.)

Chester County does not post actual reports but provides detailed highlights online - and a score of 1 to 100.

In Delaware County, which lacks a central health department, 40 municipalities conduct their own inspections, and few post them. Nine are handled by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, which posts full reports.

It is unclear how much the public uses online reports.

Bucks County, which has posted full reports since 2008, tallied 463 visitors to its database between March 31 and Wednesday. Demand is often high initially and then tapers off, said Doug Powell, an associate professor of food safety at Kansas State University who operates BarfBlog, which, despite its name, is a blog written mostly by academics.

Because of the hodgepodge of regulations and the complexity of the reports, Powell said, it is far more useful to place highly visible, simple letter or color grades at the restaurant location. A-B-C grades are used in Los Angeles and will begin in New York City in July.

But for now, Web access will have to suffice. Nothing comparable, officials said, is being considered anywhere in the Philadelphia region.

Should I Eat at This Place?

Detailed inspection reports for restaurants and other food establishments are now posted in searchable databases for most of the region.*

The language differs significantly from place to place, and can be hard to interpret. And food safety experts caution that inspections are merely a snapshot in time.

But they say the following is most important for preventing foodborne disease:

Temperature: Were cold foods kept cold? Hot foods left on a counter for hours? Some reports note what times and temperatures are safe - and what was found.

Cross-contamination: A dirty cutting board, raw beef next to salads, raw chicken kept on a rack above cooked noodles - these are disasters waiting to happen.

Hand-washing: Did employees wash their hands often and long enough (rule of thumb: the "Happy Birthday" song)? Was there a sink in the kitchen? With soap?

Repeat violations: Inspections are only as good as their snapshot in time, but repeats may suggest problems.

Pure volume: Dirt and even roaches are more ugly than unsafe, but things can add up - or stand out. "We found rodent droppings all over everything," said Doug Powell, a food safety expert at Kansas State University, and that would not be a good sign.

* Philadelphia and Bucks, Camden and Montgomery Counties post full reports in searchable databases.

Chester County posts detailed highlights.

Burlington and Gloucester Counties post one-line summaries.

In Delaware County, full reports are posted for nine municipalities whose inspections are done by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

The other 40 do their own, and most are not online. Links to inspection reports for food establishments throughout the region:

<http://go.philly.com/inspect>