

City inspector has the skinny on food

BY TOM CARTER

LAURENCE Pong of the Public Health Department had the lowdown on meat, and it was surprising.

The price of supermarket packaged steak commonly gets knocked down 25% the day after the printed expiration date, and 50% on the day after that, he said.

"And on the third day it goes to land fill," Pong said, his voice rising dramatically. "But guess what? It's fine. It's good for you — it's aged!"

The revelation amused the audience of 25. Even TL police Capt. Gary Jimenez smiled broadly. Jimenez had invited Pong to be the main speaker at the April community police meeting after the captain's audience survey showed food safety a high priority topic. The neighborhood, with the city's lowest per capita income, has no supermarket, and penny-pinching hints are welcome — if they're healthy.

The meat could be a little green, even stinky, and it wouldn't hurt you, Pong said. But supermarkets don't want customers turning up their noses at food, so they dump it. Of course meat in bad shape should be washed, and then thoroughly cooked to rid it of pathogens, if it's to be eaten, Pong said. Europeans have done that for centuries, masking the smelliest, decomposing — but quite tender — meat with heavy doses of spices and herbs.

"Cooking will make it safe," Pong said.

The DPH principal inspector and training manager has been with the department 32 years. He lectures a few times a year around the nation at conferences and knows how to raise an audience's eyebrows.

Another surprise was that the expiration dates on packaged food, cans and bottles is "arbitrary. It's just someone's best guess," Pong said, "and it's okay, not dangerous" to consume them after the date. Some retail stores deal in expired castoffs, and the San Francisco Food Bank relies heavily on them. But they don't last indefinitely. (See sidebar.)

The Environmental Health Section of DPH, where Pong is assigned, inspects 6,700 restaurants a year, and most of Pong's 20-minute talk was about inspecting them, how they are graded and what it takes to shut them down.

Among the common violations is storing food at the wrong temperature (cold food must be kept below 41 degrees Fahrenheit). Timing the refrigeration of hot food in deep containers is particularly tricky, too, because the center of the mass lingers in the dangerous temperature zone, requiring four more hours to be ready to refrigerate. Other problems include the presence of insects, flies, rodents and mold; pesticides, cleaning compounds — even glass and metal shavings — gone awry; and unsanitary habits that promote invisible bacteria and viruses that make people sick.

"Clean doesn't always hack it," Pong said. "What you can't see can hurt you. But we don't walk in with microscopes."

What closes a restaurant down faster than anything is backed-up sewage, rodent infestations and no hot water. Restaurants stay closed until they fix the problem and get reinspected.

Each restaurant is inspected at least once a year.

They start off with a score of 100. Inspectors mark them down for infractions they find in any of 68 categories. A major violation like staff not washing hands, or improper food storage temperature, knocks 12 points off.

A restaurant that gets three straight 90-plus scores makes the honor role. It receives a colorful, 5¼ by 8-inch poster to display, indicating excellence in food safety and sanitation, "a badge of honor," Pong called it. About 1,500 receive it each year. But if one doesn't get a 90 or better on its next inspection, the symbol is removed and the restaurant must earn three more 90s or better to get it back.

Barely passing is a score of 70.

"It's not a decent score," Pong said afterward, "and we work with them (restaurants) to get them to stop any high-risk practices."

The health code has, since 2004, required restaurants to post the most recent inspection report in public view. A restaurant must also furnish the scorecard grade to anyone who requests it. The grade is also available on the DPH Website by clicking on Health Department, then checking the box "How does this restaurant rate?"

If a restaurant gets a low score, it keeps it for a year, even if the department works with management to quickly fix everything.

"We don't change the grade until after the next regular inspection comes around to establish a new score," Pong said. "The restaurant has to live with the bad score from that initial inspection for a year."

Rats menace restaurants all over town, Pong said, and his description of the Norway sewer rats living in the city's stinking sewers was not for the squeamish.

"The rats you see running around above ground are young ones; the old ones have chased them out of the sewers," he said. "They are gigantic, big as cats, and they have vast harems down there."

Once, he said, a rat ran up the leg of an inspector who was examining a restaurant.

"And boy," Pong said, "the restaurant was closed like that. True story." (See sidebar.)

He distributed to anyone who wanted it a thick information folder from the department's Environmental Health Section with information for prospective food service employees on what they need to know about preparing and serving food. Each retail food facility must have at least one employee who is food safety-certified after passing an examination. That person (or persons) is responsible for the safe food handling and teaching the techniques to other employees.

The test is given in English and Cantonese, and on request in Vietnamese, Korean, Arabic and Japanese. ■

How long food lasts

THE Food Marketing Institute, Cornell University and the University of Michigan developed these guidelines for how long you can use products after their "use by" and "sell by" dates. The San Francisco Food Bank follows the guidelines, which are reprinted from its Website.

DRY/CANNED GOODS	Storage life past the code date
Rice	2 years
Flour	12 months
Canned goods, low acid (meat, fish, gravy, stew, beans, soups, carrots, corn, pasta, spinach)	5 years
Cereal	12 months
Condiments (ketchup, mustard, salad dressing, salsa)	12 months
Mayonnaise	3 months
Jams/jellies	12 months
Pasta	2 years
Oils	12 months
Peanut butter	9 months
Bottled water	1 year
Baby food	consume by code date
Vinegar	2 years
Soda: diet	3 months
Soda: regular	9 months
REFRIGERATED	
Cottage cheese	21 days
Milk	7 days
Whipping cream/aerosol whipped cream	30 days
Yogurt	10 days
Sour cream	21 days
Other fresh juices	14 days
Refrigerated salsa*	7 days
Unpasteurized juices* (i.e. Odwalla)	consume by code date
Kern's nectar*	28 days
Tofu*	21 days
Deli meats	consume by code date
Margarine	5 months
Butter	3 months
Eggs	5 weeks
Egg substitute	10 days

* The suggested shelf life of these items is based on Food Bank staff phone conversations with the manufacturers of these products.

Perils of apparel in rat attack

FOOD Inspector Lisa O'Malley remembers the day a rat ran up her leg "like it was yesterday" instead of 14 years ago on Good Friday. She was reinspecting a Clement Street restaurant for a rodent infestation that the owner said was gone.

"In those days I wore a skirt — maybe 4 inches above the knee — nylons and heels," O'Malley recalled. "I was in the back to see if the owner had plugged all the holes in the wall when I heard a scratching behind one of the walls. Then this huge rat came flying out — literally flying out of the wall at me. I was 6 feet away, it happened so fast, imagine!"

The rat landed on O'Malley's left thigh. She felt the claws go through her skirt and nylons to her skin. O'Malley remembers screaming an obscenity. Then the rat sprang off and ran into another room. She looked in disbelief at the owner. He was standing with his arms folded, she said, as if nothing had happened.

"He said, 'I want to open.' And I said, 'No, you're closed. A rat ran up my leg!'"

The owner went to her superiors to object. But they upheld her decision, and to this day repeat in awe the bizarre story.

"Now I am very cautious when I go into a basement and I carry a flashlight," O'Malley said. "And I wear pants and boots." ■

— TOM CARTER



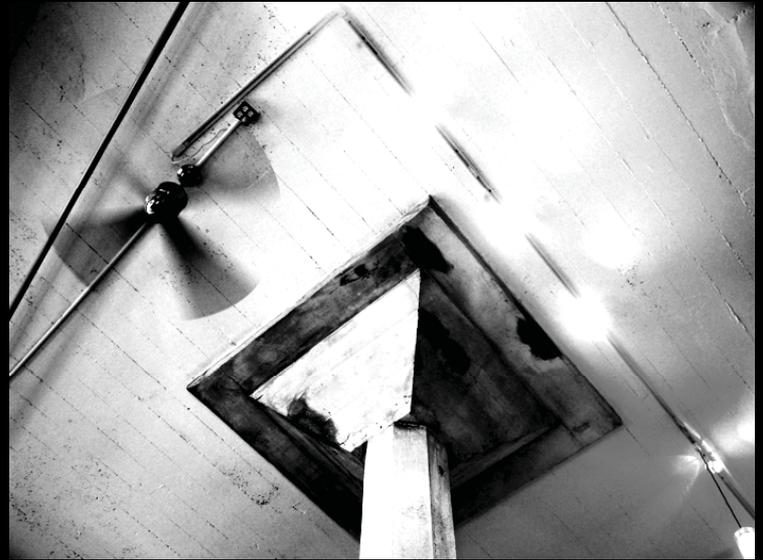
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