

Post Covid Kitchens – Plan for Change

Restaurants will get the green light at some point. When the data demonstrates that the virus is somewhat under control – whether that is the end of May or later, we all know in our hearts and minds that things will be different. Guests will not likely flock back to our operations, there will still be a considerable amount of trepidation, especially since pre-vaccine life will still include the threat of virus transmission. We also know that the health and safety regulations for restaurants will change significantly as we make every attempt to keep the public and our staff safe and at ease.

Along with giving serious thought to how restaurant concepts, menus, and methods of delivery will need to change – we must prepare for the regulations to come. Preparation for this inevitable change is the best way to set the stage for post Covid success. Here are some of the likely changes (I don't have a crystal ball- but I would be willing to bet that these will come to fruition).

VENDORS AND DELIVERIES

There is little guarantee that the product that is received at the backdoor of our restaurants is free from virus. It has already been stated that Covid-19 can live for a period of time on the surface of cardboard and there are numerous opportunities for asymptomatic individuals to come in contact with food before packaging (especially produce and animal protein). Let me be clear that there is NO INDICATION at this time that the virus can be spread through food.

It would surprise me if there were not an effort on the part of the Public Health Service and state Departments of Health to require, or at least strongly urge, restaurants to discard all cardboard packaging and thoroughly wash and sanitize received food products before they enter the production kitchen of restaurants. Lexan containers will be in high demand, as restaurants no longer store food supplies in the boxes they were delivered in.

PRE-STORAGE AREAS REQUIRED IN NEW KITCHENS FOR WASHING AND SANITIZING OF INCOMING PRODUCTS

I would anticipate that new kitchen construction code will eventually require a “pre-clean/sanitize” area in receiving areas with sinks, adequate stainless table space, storage for Lexan containers and dry racks to be used before food items as well as floor and wall surfaces that can be pressure washed and sanitized frequently. This only makes sense to help control future outbreaks.

RECORD THE PROTOCOL

It is very likely that the Public Health Service will contemplate development and implementation of product and people sanitizing before entering production kitchens. This may take some years before fully implemented, but I can envision similar protocols to what is found

in industrial food production facilities – think meat processing plant processing along with the record keeping of these standards.

A NO CARBOARD REQUIREMENT FOR KITCHENS

We have become use to recycling our cardboard on a daily basis, but it may soon be required to eliminate that packaging before food and other supplies enter a food production space or storage.

EMPLOYEE ANTIBODY TESTING AND VALIDATION

All indications are that it will be some time (at least until a vaccine is developed in 12-18 months – hopefully) before we can safely move about without the level of concern and preparation that is in place now. The only surefire way to move back to a more normal life is to verify that individuals have the antibodies that will allow them to do so. Dr. Fauci has already stated that an antibody test will likely be available in a week or so and will be ramped up to produce the quantities needed. Is it too much of a stretch to envision a federal, or at least state-by-state requirement for people to have some type of validation that proves they have the antibodies that would deem them relatively safe – especially for healthcare and foodservice workers? In some states it is already a requirement that foodservice employees have a validated test for Tuberculosis before they are allowed to handle food.

PERSONAL TEMPERATURE CHECKS AND LOGS

Just as probable will be a requirement in certain industries for employees to have a validated body temperature check before they enter a place of work and that these records be maintained or even submitted to a higher authority on a regular basis. This only makes sense (already required in most healthcare facilities).

SERVESAFE REQUIREMENTS FOR ALL EMPLOYEES

In some states – ServeSafe or something comparable is required of all foodservice workers. Wouldn't it make sense that this becomes a requirement of all foodservice workers? How long before this becomes a Public Health Service mandate?

MASKS REQUIRED

It is highly likely that the first requirement once we are allowed to re-open restaurants at some level are that all food handlers (maybe even service staff) wear a protective mask. Of course, we need to have enough masks available to purchase first.

HAND WASHING TRAINING

“Wash your hands” has always been a mantra in restaurants of all types but have we been thorough in our training? Do people know and practice the 20-second aggressive wash protocol every time they wash their hands? Do they use gloves when required and do so properly? Do

they feel too confident with gloves to invest enough time washing their hands as well? Hand washing will become an even more critical standard in restaurants.

REQUIRED OUTSIDE LAUNDERING OF UNIFORMS

Many restaurants require uniforms but leave it up to employees to launder their own, many wear their uniforms to work rather than change on premise, and many restaurants fail to have any consistent sanitary uniform policy. Expect that this will eventually change (for the better) and expect that outside laundering and sanitizing services will be expected (except where restaurants have their own laundries). Gone will be that favorite T-shirt as a uniform of choice, unwashed shoes, baseball caps, or cargo pants and shorts.

WORK SURFACE SANITATION PROTOCOL AND TESTING

In kitchens of a certain size it may make sense to develop a new position that focuses on pre-cleaning and processing of food before it enters the production space, strict oversight of hand washing and sanitizing of work services and equipment, employee personal temperature testing and documentation of all of the above, maintaining antibody validation records, etc. Basically, you may want to make future plans for an infection control person on your staff. Is this a stretch? I don't think so.

VERY STRICT HACCP ENFORCEMENT

HACCP (time temperature tracking) has been creeping up on restaurant operations for a few years and will become the most critical safety/sanitation issue in the future. Those logs and follow-through must become second nature.

NEW PROCEDURES FOR CLEAN DISHES, FLATWARE AND GLASSWARE

How will we ensure that the service ware that restaurants use is free of contamination before menu items are plated and delivered to a guest? Someone will push for stricter controls on this – be prepared to see a plethora of new equipment designed to accomplish this goal.

MORE FREQUENT HEALTH INSPECTIONS

We can all expect an annual, unannounced health inspection (more if there is a registered complaint or previous issue), but in the future there will likely be a push for more interaction with your local health department. It could take a variety of forms – one full inspection, and others to check on critical issues, or required periodic classes that at the very least – chefs and managers will need to attend.

WORKSPACE REQUIREMENTS FOR NEW KITCHENS THAT FOCUS ON SAFE DISTANCES BETWEEN EMPLOYEES

The typical design of a restaurant leads to the smallest amount of kitchen space to accomplish the job – leaving more space for revenue generation out front. It is likely that code

requirements in the future will state that a certain amount of space per anticipated kitchen employee is standard. This could allow for future distancing of employees to prevent asymptomatic spread of a virus.

UV LIGHTS IN COOLERS AND STORAGE AREAS

At some level, ultraviolet light does help to control the growth of bacteria. This may become a standard lighting requirement in food storage areas.

A NEW VERSION OF SANITIZERS FOR POT SINKS AND DISHWASHERS

Bleach or iodine solutions are the standards for sanitizing pots, pans, and work surfaces in kitchens. I would anticipate a new family of sanitizing agents that can protect against bacterial transmission as well as current and future viruses.

It would seem likely that some or maybe all of these changes are in our future. It won't happen overnight, but we all realize that the health and safety of our guests and employees is (should be) our primary concern. So – it makes sense to plan for change in this regard.

PLAN BETTER – TRAIN HARDER

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