The Safe Zone: Unsafe Bet
By Lee Biars
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Usually when you want to know something, the best way to get answers is to go right to the source. In a recent company meeting with our managing partners and directors of various departments, a question was posed that none of us could really answer definitively: “What does the average food-handling employee in the restaurant industry think about food safety as it relates to their job?” More specifically, “Do they care that the food they are serving is safe, or is it just an afterthought?”

Now, most of Safe Food Solutions’ employees have worked in foodservice in some capacity, but we are somewhat biased when it comes to food safety. Therefore, we realized the answers we came up with to this question could not have been accurate. In an effort to expand our view – and perhaps get to the real answer – it was suggested we find a non-manager, line-level kitchen employee with good restaurant experience, interview him/her and find out definitively the answer to our question. I volunteered to be the interviewer and hit the streets to find an “average food-handling employee.”

The Eye-Opening Interview
After a few days and several restaurants, I found a person – I’ll call him “John” – that had held various kitchen positions in a variety of foodservice establishments and who agreed to be our beacon of truth on the condition of anonymity. John has been in the restaurant business for more than 14 years and has worked in every sector from fast food to a cafeteria to family casual, usually staying at a job between one to two years. He is currently a line cook at a fine dining establishment on the East Coast.

What follows is the interview in its entirety. You may be surprised, as I was, by many of his answers:

Lee Biars: Let’s get right to the point: How do you feel about food safety as it relates to your job?
John: I know food safety’s important and I try to do everything I can to make the food I prepare safe. If I see something that looks or smells bad, I won’t serve it.

Lee Biars: Have you ever gone through a food safety training course in your 14-plus years?
John: No. They usually only send the head chef and maybe a couple sous chefs to those classes. I have had bosses who talk to the kitchen about food safety, but not as a formal class.

Lee Biars: If you’ve never been trained in food safety, how can be sure that you’re following proper food safety procedures?
John: Honestly, I can’t be sure, but I know the basics. I know the temperatures they want us to cook certain foods to and I always wash my hands after handling dangerous stuff like chicken.

Lee Biars: How many times on average would you say you wash your hands during a dinner shift?
John: If I had to guess, I’d say around five or six.

Lee Biars: Do you always use soap?
John: Honestly, no. If it’s very busy, sometimes I’ll just run my hands under the water and dry them off.

Lee Biars: You know that really doesn’t do anything, right?
John: Yeah, but sometimes it’s so busy all I can think about is what I need to do next. Something like washing your hands becomes a low priority. I try to do what I can.

Lee Biars: Let’s talk about your co-workers and bosses, past and present. Have you ever worked for an operation that took food safety very seriously?
John: There was one chef who made us take the internal temperature of every piece of meat that went out because he wanted to make sure it was cooked all the way through. It was kind of a pain in the butt. Come to think of it, he was always telling people to wash their hands, too. He wasn’t very popular to work for.

Lee Biars: Have you personally – or have you seen someone else – dropped a piece of food on the floor or on an unclean surface and still serve it?
John: I’m embarrassed to say that I have done it, and I’ve seen other people do it. Sometimes you just don’t have enough time to put another burger, or whatever it was, on the grill.

Lee Biars: How would you feel if you ate somewhere and knew your food had been dropped on the floor?
John: Yeah, it’s pretty gross. Sometimes you just get lost in the moment and lose your perspective. I’m not saying it’s right to do it, but it does happen. I mainly eat at places where I know the people or at nicer places. I figure at the nicer places, like where I am now, they take better care or are watched more carefully.

Lee Biars: What are some of the worst things you have seen while working a kitchen job?
John: There was one place where the kitchen had a roach problem they just couldn’t squelch. That
was pretty nasty. Another place I worked, the chef refused to throw anything out. If the chicken salad smelled bad, he would just mix in a fresh batch to hide the smell. You see a lot of stuff working this job that would be enough to keep you from eating out. I worked at a corporate chain that got their steaks in Cryovac. When it was super busy, you could pop four or five of them in the dishwasher, in the Cryovac, run it through a wash and it would come out a perfect medium. Then pop it on the grill for the grill marks and you’ve steamed your way to a quick pick-up.

**LB:** Wow, that is pretty bad. How would you rate your current employer when it comes to food safety?

**John:** The chef here pretty much leaves us alone if we’re doing our job and getting the food out quickly. Since I’ve been doing this for so long, I pretty much know what I’m doing and he doesn’t get on my back about stuff. But I believe he watches us.

**Where to Begin?**
A few things really jumped out at me during this interview. Although I wasn’t totally shocked – and anyone who’s read Anthony Bourdain’s *Kitchen Confidential* or watched “Kitchen Nightmare” would probably agree – it is hard to fathom how a guy who has been working in kitchens for more than a decade has never been educated in food safety. This clearly shows that food safety education, and consequently the welfare of their patrons, is a low priority for foodservice establishments. Simply put, if they cared more, they would do more.

Secondly, I found it somewhat amusing that the chef who actually cared about food safety and made his employees follow the rules was seen as annoying and difficult to work for. Here’s a guy who cares about the safety of his product and the welfare of his customers, but his employees feel this is an unreasonable way to run a kitchen.

Lastly, the restaurant John currently works for is a fine-dining establishment, and even there the chef isn’t taking an active role in seeing that his employees are handling food safely. It’s very clear to me that food safety is an afterthought across the board – from fast-food joints to white tablecloth establishments.

Overall, this interview was helpful as my team and I assessed how “an average foodservice employee” feels about food safety. We learned that food safety often takes a back seat to the pick-ups, ticket times and everything else that goes on in the kitchen.

My question is: Why aren’t we, as owners, operators, CEOs and patrons doing more to make sure that John and his co-workers aren’t cutting corners so that we are serving the safest food possible?

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