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Editorial: Be like L.A.

Restaurant grades protect public health

Bee Editorial Staff - (Published June 21, 2003)

In March, when the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors revamped the county's restaurant inspection system to better guard the health of diners, supervisors rejected citizen pleas that restaurants be given, and be required to post, a letter grade on the cleanliness of their operations, as restaurants must do in counties such as Los Angeles and San Diego. Thanks to a new study in the Quarterly Journal of Economics, we now know the price of the supervisors' kowtowing to the restaurant industry: a lot of unnecessary food poisoning.

In 1997, Los Angeles County, under pressure from media exposés of unsanitary conditions in local restaurants, started issuing inspection letter grades to eateries -- A, B, C -- and requiring that the grades be posted at the front door. The hope behind the simple new system was that customers would tend to take their appetites and dollars to restaurants with the higher cleanliness grades and that restaurants would respond to consumer pressure by cleaning up their kitchens.

According to the findings of economists Ginger Zhe Jin of the University of Maryland and Phillip Leslie of Stanford University, those hopes have turned to realities.

Before the new grading system was adopted, changes in restaurant cleanliness had no effect on consumer behavior, they found. Although the county inspected and rated restaurants and restaurants were required to produce their inspection reports upon customers' demands, diners simply didn't know whose kitchens were dirty and whose were not.

That changed when restaurants had to post their letter grade for all to see, Jin and Leslie report. Revenues went up by more than 5 percent at restaurants posting an "A" grade. And the hygiene scores improved, suggesting to the economists that restaurants were getting cleaner.

They confirmed that suspicion by tracking data for the number of Los Angeles residents hospitalized with food-borne illnesses. They found, to their amazement, a nearly 20 percent decrease in food-related hospitalizations. "We tried various ways to make that number go away," Leslie says, "but we couldn't."

Those remarkable results confirm the wisdom of the Sacramento citizens who asked the supervisors in March to bring the Los Angeles grading system to Sacramento County. The lame system adopted by the supervisors -- requiring posting of handwritten inspection reports -- won't provide diners the simple signals they need to protect their health and won't goose restaurants to keep their kitchens clean.

Diners deserve better: a grade on the door. And the supervisors deserve a half-cooked shrimp salad left out overnight on a kitchen counter.