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Patrons were at risk at 1,550 restaurants

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JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Best Bar B Q Restaurant on Beach Street in China Town had the highest total of the most serious types of violations last year in Boston with 70.

By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE STAFF MAY 25, 2015

City inspectors last year found multiple instances of the most serious type of health and sanitary code violations at nearly half of Boston's restaurants and food service locations, according to a Globe review of [municipal data](#).

At least two violations that can cause food-borne illness — the most serious of three levels — were discovered at more than 1,350 restaurants across Boston during 2014, according to records of inspections at every establishment in the city that serves food, including upscale dining locations, company cafeterias, takeout and fast-food restaurants, and food trucks.

Five or more of the most serious violations were discovered at more than 500 locations, or about 18 percent of all restaurants in the city, and 10 or more of the most serious violations were identified at about 200 eateries.

A violation is classified under the most serious category when inspectors observe improper practices or procedures that research has identified as the most prevalent contributing factors of food-borne illness.

Examples of such infractions include: not storing food or washing dishes at proper temperatures, employees not following hand-washing and glove-wearing protocols, and evidence that insects or rodents have been near food.



Database: Inspection reports

A database provides inspection information on food locations in Boston.

Food safety in numbers

Quiz: Do you know food safety?

Food-borne illness typically causes relatively minor symptoms — the US Centers for Disease Control estimates that about 1 in 6 Americans get sick from food-borne illness each year — but it can be much more serious. An estimated 128,000 people nationwide are hospitalized because of food-borne illnesses each year and 3,000 die from them.

“We take all violations seriously,” said William Christopher, commissioner of the city’s Inspectional Service Department, which sends officials from its health division to review conditions at food establishments across Boston.

“Anything that potentially causes a food-borne illness is of most concern,” he said.

Christopher said the city received more food-safety-related complaints from restaurant patrons in recent years, but he attributed the increase to the advent of new and more convenient ways online for customers to report concerns to the city.

The number of violations found annually citywide, including the most serious infractions, has fluctuated in recent years, but overall the figures have remained relatively steady.

Last year, the location with the highest total of the most serious types of violation was Best Barbecue Kitchen, a small butcher shop and takeout restaurant on Beach Street in Chinatown, which racked up 70 such violations, according to city records.

Violation lookup

Enter a food establishment in Boston to see all its critical (level 2 and 3) violations since 2012

Go

SOURCE: City of Boston
RUSSELL GOLDENBERG / GLOBE STAFF

That restaurant also had the highest total of violations in all categories — at 219 — last year. As of last month, Best Barbecue Kitchen had accumulated the highest number of the most serious violations: 130, dating to 2007, when the city began posting the data online. It also had the second-highest total of violations of any type: 614.

The restaurant that had the second-highest total of the most serious violations last year was Cosi, a cafe and sandwich chain inside South Station, where 50 were found. The restaurant with the third-highest total of the most serious violations last year could be found several feet away inside South Station: Master Wok, which had

45.

Bryan Marks, vice president of operations for Cosi, told the Globe on Tuesday that the company worked quickly to address the violations and corrected them all within a matter of days, if not sooner.

“We acted very, very quickly,” he said. “We take our food safety and sanitation practices very seriously, which you can tell by how quickly we reacted to these issues.”

Staff members at the other two restaurants — Barbecue Kitchen and Master Wok — declined to comment last week and requests to speak with managers went unanswered.

Bob Luz, president and chief executive of the Massachusetts Restaurant Association, said customers' safety is the top priority for restaurant owners.

“Food safety is number one for every restaurateur in the state, and obviously it's something we consider as incredibly important,” said Luz.

“Anytime there's any type of violation, restaurateurs take that information and react very quickly and work with health department officials to get that action corrected right away,” he added. “We have a very good relationship with the Department of Public Health in the Commonwealth, as well as the health departments in each municipality.”

City officials said most violations are the result of human error and restaurant owners are usually cooperative with city inspectors and work to quickly address violations.

The city's goal is to help violators remedy the issues and prevent a repeat of the situation, Christopher said.

“From a philosophical point of view we try to work with all these establishments,” said Christopher. “We work hard to make sure [restaurateurs and their staff] understand what our expectations are.”

The city typically does not fine restaurants for violations, Christopher said, but in some egregious cases, a license is temporarily suspended, forcing the establishment to close down until the problems have been resolved.

Repeat offenders will see additional visits by city inspectors, Christopher said. The city has the power to permanently shutter noncompliant restaurants, but that is “very, very rare,” he added. Christopher and other city officials said they believe it has been at least several years since such action was taken.

“With close monitoring, it should never reach that level,” said Christopher.

Every food service establishment in Boston is inspected at least once per year, visits in which inspectors arrive unannounced, Christopher said.

“We want to see their normal course of operation,” said Christopher.

In addition to annual inspections, complaints prompt a visit. Complaint-driven inspections are a top priority and inspectors are dispatched immediately to respond to them, Christopher said.

The city last year inspected more than 3,000 restaurants, some of which were visited more than once.

Those visits turned up more than 42,000 health and sanitary code violations altogether, but about 32,000 of the transgressions — or roughly three quarters of them — were “noncritical,” the least serious of three violation types, according to the city’s records.

Such offenses do not seriously affect public health. For example, a noncritical violation can include not labeling a container of sugar, or not installing signs at sinks about how to properly wash hands.

Another 2,500 violations, or 6 percent of last year’s total, fell in an intermediate classification called critical, which is defined as a violation that is more likely than others to contribute to food contamination, illness, or environmental health hazard, or has the potential to seriously affect the public health.

The remaining 7,600 offenses, or 18 percent of all violations last year, were classified at the most serious level.

In 2007, years after first promising to do so, the city began posting data about restaurant inspections online, shortly after a [Globe investigation](#) of food inspection reports for 50 eateries in Boston revealed how city inspectors had found serious violations at nearly half of the locations, including high-end restaurants.

Most 'food-borne illness risk factor critical' violations in 2014

Restaurant	Best Barbecue Kitchen
Address	86 Beach St.
Violations	70

Restaurant	Cosi South Station
Address	630 Atlantic Ave.
Violations	50

Restaurant	Master Wok
Address	650 Atlantic Ave.
Violations	45

Restaurant	Taiwan Cafe
Address	34 Oxford St.

Violations 41

Restaurant Bubor Cha-cha

Address 41 Beach St.

Violations 40

Restaurant Empire Garden

Address 686 Washington St.

Violations 38

Restaurant Back Deck

Address 10 West St.

Violations 36

Restaurant Great Barbecu Inc.

Address 15 Hudson St.

Violations 35

Restaurant Hong Kong Eatery

Address 79 Harrison Ave.

Violations 33

Restaurant Pho Hoa Restaurant II Inc.

Address 19 Beach St.

Violations 32

SOURCE: City of Boston

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Inside the Best Bar B Q Restaurant on Beach Street.

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