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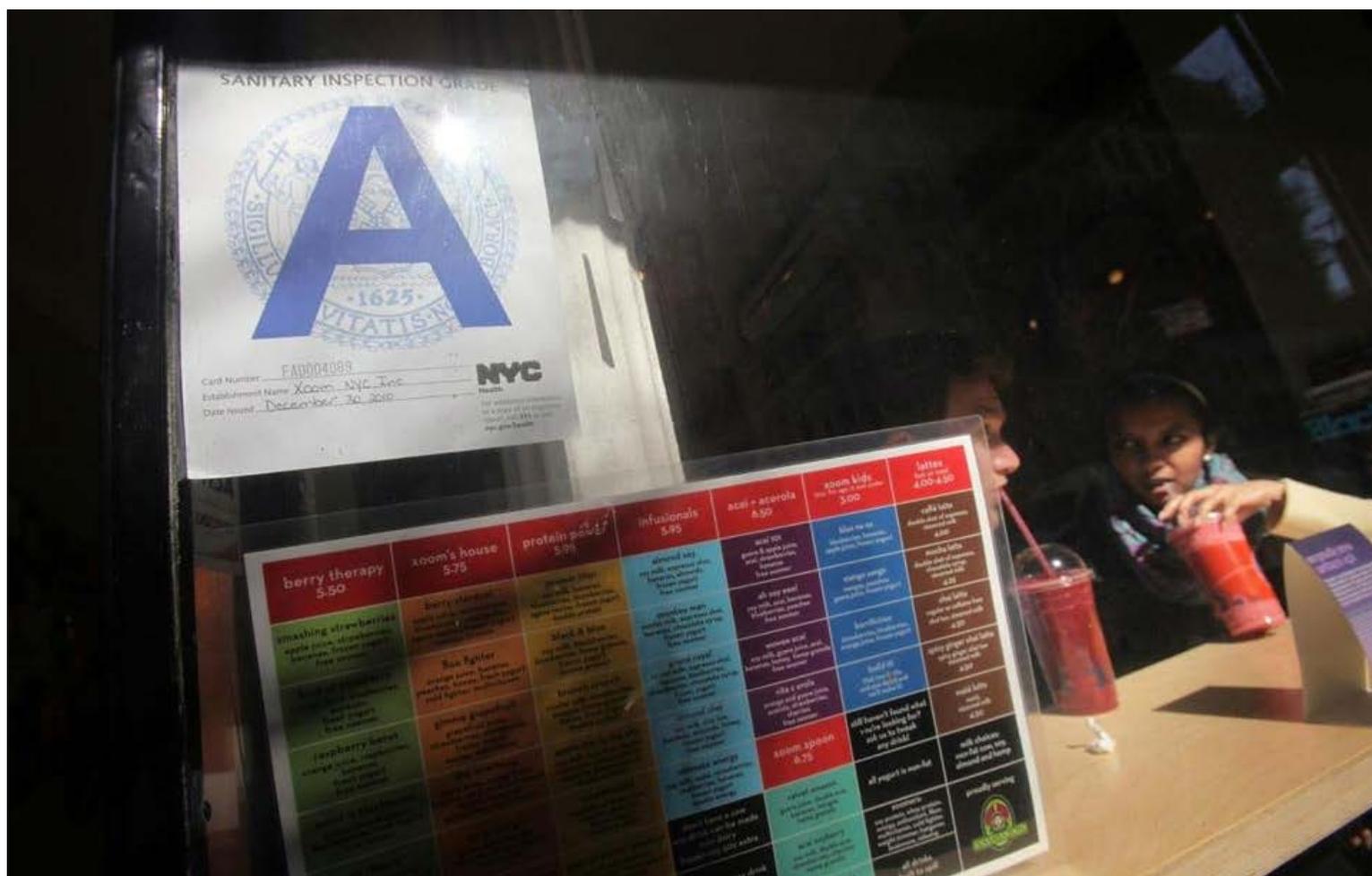
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**Boston may create a restaurant rating system that resembles New York's prominently posted letter grades for establishments.**

By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE STAFF MAY 29, 2015

Boston may create a system to publicly rate the cleanliness and food safety practices of each restaurant in the city, an effort that could resemble New York's prominently posted letter grades for establishments.

"I'm very confident it will happen," said William Christopher, commissioner of Boston's Inspectional Services Department. "The main objective is to educate the consumers so they can make an educated assessment of where they want to eat."

The [Globe](#) reported earlier this week that city inspectors last year found multiple instances of the most serious type of health and sanitary code violations at nearly half of Boston's food service locations, including restaurants, food trucks, and cafeterias.

Christopher said the restaurant rating program, which would require City Council approval, would be based on the results of the municipal health and sanitary code inspections that his department already conducts at every food service location at least once a year.

His staff has spent the past few months researching models from other cities, including [Seattle](#), which is developing a rating system, and [New York](#), which has been displaying letter grades on storefronts and posting them online since 2010. Los Angeles has been issuing grades since 1997.



## Database: Inspection reports

A database provides inspection information on food locations in Boston.

**Inspections find serious violations widespread in Boston**

**Editorial: Don't hide restaurants' dirty secrets**

Residents and tourists ambling past restaurants and shops on Charles Street in Beacon Hill on Friday night largely applauded the proposal.

“It’s a good idea,” said Sarah Welch, 21, as she and two of her friends tried to make up their minds about where to go for dinner.

Her friend and fellow Suffolk University student Janine Heller, also 21, said she lived in New York City for nine months during 2011, but admitted she rarely, if ever, noticed the letter grades in restaurant windows.

But she hopes Boston adopts a similar system.

“We should know what we’re paying for,” said Heller. “If it’s a good restaurant, then why would they mind?”

Carol Leonard and John Hamilton were in town visiting from San Francisco, another city that posts health and sanitary ratings in restaurants.

“When you’re walking by, you can’t miss it,” said Leonard. “If we walk past a restaurant and it has a low rating, we’re not going in.”

She said restaurants that get poor marks don’t tend to stay in business very long.

Zena Sheinberg, 65, of Ann Arbor, Mich., said she closely monitors health department violations in her home city, and said a simplified rating system that is more prominently available would be a good idea.

“These restaurants would get their act together if they had a ‘C’ sticker in their window,” she said.

City officials in New York and Los Angeles say their grading systems have led to improvements.

Both cities say reports of food-borne illness have declined, and over the years, more restaurants have earned an A on their initial annual inspection, allowing them to avoid additional reviews and fines.

Inspectors in New York reported that within the first two years of the program more restaurants trained staff properly, kept food at a safe temperature, had adequate hand-washing facilities, and showed fewer signs of mice.

But such systems have also faced criticism. Some have questioned assertions that the grading systems lead to improved conditions, and others have accused the systems of being arbitrary and unfair.

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#### 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

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Christopher said he does not intend to simply replicate rating systems that other cities use, but to learn from those models and to make any necessary customizing for Boston.

“We’re looking at the right way to do it so that we’re fair to our restaurateurs,” said Christopher, who added that developing and implementing a rating system in Boston is “months away . . . I want to make sure we do this right.”

The head of the state’s restaurant association said the industry supports efforts to improve food safety, but is concerned that a grading system could oversimplify a complex process.

“A restaurant’s livelihood could be affected by these reports,” said Stephen Clark, director of government affairs for the Massachusetts Restaurant Association. “Attempting to reduce complex findings to a single letter or score based on subjective interpretations of individual inspectors may give a false or misleading picture of actual sanitation levels and food safety conditions in a food service establishment.”

He urged Boston to consider carefully how to inform diners about the cleanliness of restaurants.

“Jurisdictions now using scoring systems without understanding their limitations present a disservice to the public and industry,” Clark said. “Any scoring system should be easy for the health inspector, the public, and regulated industry to understand.”

Christopher contended that the ratings could be positive for business, creating a new way for food establishments to improve through competition.

“If you have restaurants across the street from each other — you’re an A restaurant, and I’m a C restaurant, I’m going to do everything in my power to try to become an A restaurant,” he said.

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