

5-25-12 Is Mobile Food Safe?

Depending on where you live, you might rarely see temporary or mobile food operations or might think of them as an ordinary ever day occurrence. They are also seen by some as a tasty roadside convenience and by others as an unsavory thing to be avoided,. If your way of thinking currently places them in the “to be avoided unless starving” category, know this: They can be safe, even upscale and there are more on the way! In a time of recession, people might be able to start up that little hot dog cart or outfit a truck/trailer into a small restaurant but most of us cannot afford to purchase or build a full restaurant and charge enough to cover all the overhead costs, with a profit left at the end of the day.

While I can’t speak to what zoning or permit issues might apply to a particular location for that food cart or trailer, I can say that these mobile food operations can be completely safe; just as camping can be safe. And it is my job to make sure they are. I could use more support from our Department of Public Health, which has been assuming that these mobile units are delivery systems of food, such as in the sandwich trucks, aka “roach coaches” in some circles, seen outside of urban construction sites or the large vans delivering prepared food for that private catered event. Both of those instances have a permitted base of operations for preparing their food. That base might be solely for the purpose of catering or the catering business might even be an adjunct to a restaurant.

Trucks and trailers can be outfitted for preparing and serving food as a small scale restaurant, with the capability of (or acceptable plan for) utensil washing, hand washing, cooking, cold food preparation, hot and cold holding and storage, water supply and waste-water disposal, along with safety measures such as fire suppression, to name a few of the possible tasks and requirements.

In Plan Review courses, we learn that our questions and requirements depend on the menu. Do they have enough space for separation of ready to eat foods such as salads from the ones requiring more extensive prevention from cross contamination, such as raw meats? Both the health agent and the entrepreneur might therefore assume that the simpler the menu, the simpler it is to build and outfit the necessary environment for safe food storage, preparation and clean-up. While to a certain degree that is true; it is not the whole story.

Take for instance a recent afternoon of inspections at an outdoor event. I was expecting one inspection of a food building outfitted with all that is needed for a preparing and serving meals, such as ware washing sinks, a hand washing sink, grill and refrigerators. I was familiar with the building but was seeing the food people for the first time. Therefore, I expected to breeze through the inspection of the building but take time to watch and talk to the new people. I

was also expecting to see two permitted ice cream trucks and a permitted mobile pizza operation, all of whom I had met and seen in action before.

I was not expecting to find two unpermitted, never before seen (by me) mobile operations; one for coffee and smoothies and another for shaved ice drinks and snow cones.

How do you think the report card read and how much of my time was required for this wide variety of businesses? The new meal preparation people were professional and prepared. They knew and understand the requirements for their business and they took immediate measures for what was lacking or needed in the building. I was pleased. The building owner received critical violations for building related issues and a warning to correct them before his next outdoor event. I was not only displeased, I was annoyed and disappointed, as these corrections were needed in the previous year and had been promised. The time has arrived to work this out and get it done!

The pizza operation is a thing of beauty offering fresh ingredients, a simple menu, an amazing mobile brick oven pizza, with a built-in hand washing station. A welcome sight by any health agent! They arrived with prepared food items and the use of paper plates avoided the need for large amounts of storage and/or the need for ware washing. The staff was knowledgeable of food safety. I was pleased!

How did the simple menus of ice cream trucks, the coffee, tea, and smoothie trailer and the snow cone operations fare? You'll be surprised at how much can go wrong with so small an operation and also how beautifully and safely it can be executed. Tune in next week for the rest of the report card.

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