

6-1-12 Mobile Food: Madness or Magnificence?

A recent visit to a large outdoor event gave me the opportunity, shall we say, to compare mobile food vendors: the permitted ones with the surprises and the ones who brought knowledge of food safety with those who brought an attitude instead. The temporary vendors in the small building were doing a good job with knowledge, temperatures and sanitation, so it was time to venture out into the event to see the latest ice cream truck. If it was as clean and tidy as the owner's other truck, this shouldn't take long and I'd be off to other things on that beautiful Saturday afternoon.

The ice cream trucks were immaculate and prepared for washing hands, for keeping hands and fingers out of scooped ice cream with long handled scoops and gloves, and they had all their paperwork in order. They were licensed as Hawkers and Peddlers in the State of Massachusetts. They had a permit through my office and their CORI (Criminal Record Offender Information) was completed. More and more checks and balances are required of mobile operations each year, resulting in the literal writing of numerous banking checks on their part! They get a permit for each town of operation and even provide finger prints for the Police Department. I was very pleased with the ice cream trucks and was able to move on to those dreaded unforeseen, unpermitted operations. There were two that I could see.

I met the coffee and smoothie lady for the first time, so an introduction was in order. In response to my expression of surprise of not being informed by the owner or event coordinator, her response was, "Oh, they probably didn't think it was necessary, since I don't serve any food." Oh, brother! At that moment, I knew I would be there for a while! And I was! The least of my concerns was the lack of permit and she indicated the ability and willingness to write a check on the spot for a one day permit. I needed to watch her for a bit and possibly teach her how to serve drinks safely. Not that it's my job at that moment to teach, but I'd rather take the time teach than simply write a report of violations. How will paperwork alone help the world to be a safer place?

The first observation was the use of a sponge. That's on the list of no-no's. It's a bacteria-growing medium and is not allowed in a kitchen serving the public. All surfaces are wiped with cloths, kept at all times, except for when they are being used, in a bucket of an approved sanitizer. I usually see either chlorine bleach or quaternary ammonium. The woman had a container of bleach but no place to mix it. She also had "Quat" test strips, rather than the chlorine ones she needed. She feigned shock at this discovery and blamed the store for selling the wrong kind! I reminded her that it was her responsibility to know what kind of test strip she needed and handed her some chlorine strips.

Moving on to the food itself, for, in fact, everything she served was food, even the ice cubes, as we say in Massachusetts, I told her she needed to keep her fingers out of the ice as she

scooped them. She attempted to disguise a look that said, “Are you kidding me?” but the face was read like a book. Seeing the need for an understanding, I told her about the Hepatitis A outbreaks in Massachusetts back in 2001 and 2002. The big take away from that experience was that people shed viruses onto whatever they touch and food can become the vehicle for the virus. People who became ill had eaten foods like ice cream, sandwiches and salads. These foods had not been in the spotlight for food safety the way meat is or the importance of hot and cold holding. Ever since those outbreaks involving lawsuits and clinics for hundreds of people for receiving shots of immune globulin, Massachusetts has adopted the phrase “No Bare Hand Contact for Ready to Eat Foods.”

It had been a while since I’d had to give my Hep A 101 lecture but she needed it! She then tried to tell me, as the next customer came along, that of course she did not want her customers to see her touching the food with her bare hands (Note the wording: to see her), as she opened a cabinet, pulled out a pair of purple gloves from the box and wearing the purple gloves proceeded to break cookies into the blender. I observed that there were no other gloves of any color in the waste basket, as she tossed that one pair as soon as she was done with the specialty blended drink.

I was there for an hour and could have stayed longer. She’ll be receiving a letter from me at her out of state address that was on the check for thirty five dollars, the cost of a one day permit. She received a good deal, if you ask me. I hope she was paying attention because she won’t be receiving a permit next time if her truck is not in order; she doesn’t demonstrate knowledge of food safety and/or doesn’t have her Hawkers and Peddlers license. No permit from me means no vending to the public.

The second unpermitted truck was for snow cones. The woman was polite and her place was immaculate. She may have lacked the permit but she had the knowledge of food safety. It was a bright ending to a long day. I was thankful.

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