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SPECIAL REPORT

Day three of a four-part series

BLADE PHOTO BY ALLAN DETRICH



Fast-food restaurants have some of the cleanest kitchens in Toledo. Cindy Modlinski has worked five years for Burger King, the chain with the fewest violations.

FAST FOOD OUTLETS KEEP UP TO SPEED

BY MICHAEL D. SALLAH
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For 19-year-old Nathan Smith, it was always the same scene: kitchen workers barking orders, french fries crackling in a vat of grease, and a dozen burgers on the grill.

"And you got supervisors all over asking you to wash your hands," says the onetime McDonald's worker.

"Make sure your hair is tucked in your hat. Make sure you wipe the counters. Make sure you wash your hands if you leave the grill area — even if it's for a second."

Those demands, heard every day in the kitchens of Toledo's fast-food restaurants, may be making marks on food safety.

Although criticized by nutrition experts, fast-food outlets in Toledo are among the cleanest places to eat.

In a computer analysis of Toledo restaurant inspection records from 1990 to last year, The Blade found:

► There are fewer violations, such as dirty kitchens or raw meat kept at unsafe temperatures, at fast-food outlets than traditional dining establishments.

► The two fast-food chains in Toledo with the fewest health violations per store are the ones most criticized by diet gurus: Burger King and McDonald's.

WHO'S WATCHING



THE KITCHEN?

► Pizza outlets have fewer violations than all other kinds of restaurants.

The average pizzeria, including chains such as Pizza Hut, Marco's, and Little Caesars, has 2.8 violations per inspection.

For traditional, sit-down restaurants it is 4.3.

In addition, fewer people complain about getting sick at pizza places than other restaurants.

"In a day and age when more people are eating pizzas, that may be the first good news in a long time," says Donald Pierce, a marketing consultant in Boynton Beach, Fla., who tracks trends in the fast-food industry.

Some of the possible reasons fast food does better in inspections: intensive training for employees, a shorter shelf life for food, and less complex menus.

But fast-food restaurants have not been without problems — some serious.

In the last year, exterminators battled mice at a Little Caesar's on Talmadge Road at the same time they fought roaches across town at a McDonald's on Broadway Street.

And the Wendy's on West Alexis Road has repeatedly been cited for keeping food at unsafe temperatures, which can allow dangerous bacteria to form.

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Fast food

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"It's obvious that we need to devote more attention to the city inspections," said Denny Lynch, a Wendy's vice president. The Ohio-based burger chain averages five violations per inspection in Toledo — the most among the chains.

Whatever the drawbacks, fast food and pizza continue to grow in popularity, industry analysts say.

In 1970, there were only a handful of such places in Toledo. Now, they account for one out of every three restaurants.

In fact, fast-food restaurants are woven into the fabric of our lives. School kids hang out here, and promotional mascots like Ronald McDonald have become American icons.

"We used to go to McDonald's after the high school games," said Cindy Meyers, 38, a Start High School teacher. "Now, my teenage daughter is doing the same thing."

Part of the reason for the incredible rise in fast food is our quick-paced society: More and more people are eating on the run.

Over the years, fast-food giants have tried to meet the demands — and counter the fears — by pouring millions of dollars into hygiene and food safety training.

That may be one reason why fast food and pizza have had some of the cleanest kitchens in Toledo.

Some say the trend is rooted in well-developed training programs for employees.

"They stay on you, train you," said Michele Ogden, 17, who has worked at McDonald's and Taco Bell outlets. "You pretty much know what to do by the time it's over."

Plus, most fast-food places have stainless steel kitchens with computerized cooking equipment — trademarks of food safety.

For instance, workers now take french fries from sanitized containers in the freezer, toss them into cooking oils tested for purity, and remove them when the cooker buzzes.

"There is so little room for error," said Mr. Pierce, the marketing consultant.

"You have to laugh, because for so long the so-called diet gurus trashed places like McDonald's and Burger King. But the bottom line is that they're cleaner than most people would ever give them credit for."

Burger King spokesman Kim Miller said inspection violations — like serving bad beef — are "taken very, very seriously."

The giant burger chain had the lowest number of violations per inspection — 2.2 — of the fast-food places in Toledo.

One way Burger King tries to keep violations down is through a "mystery shopper" program.

The chain hires teams of undercover customers to go into Burger King outlets all across the country, order food, and then grade the outlets on cleanliness and service.

In addition, chains such as Burger King, McDonald's, and Wendy's have corporate officials going from restaurant to restaurant performing

their own in-house inspections.

Some outlets have problems

Local inspectors say they are just as concerned about fast food as traditional restaurants.

"Fast food has its problems," said Dale Hertzfeld, a supervisor in the Toledo Health Department.

Take the McDonald's at 1736 Broadway.

In four of the last six years, people have called health inspectors to complain about roaches, records show.

Once, someone said the insects were crawling near the grills and warming shelves.

Another time, a roach was reportedly in someone's french fries.

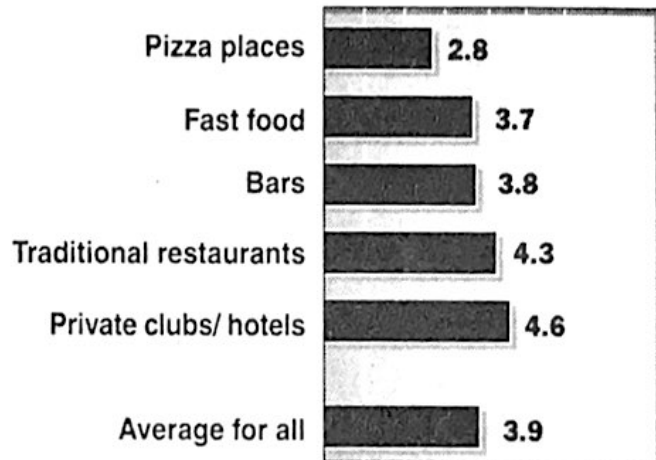
And this past July, an inspector found several dead bugs inside a soft drink dispenser.

Said Mike Henry, a McDonald's district supervisor: "We do have

Fast food, pizza fare better

Violations range from minor infractions, such as no paper towels in restrooms, to serious problems, such as food left unrefrigerated. This list reflects only a restaurant's average number of violations. It does not reflect the seriousness of the infractions.

Average number of violations per inspection



violations at some of our stores. And when we have them, we try to correct them immediately."

Across town at Little Caesar's pizza, 4600 Talmadge Rd., mice have been the problem.

Earlier this year, someone complained about a mouse "running around" inside.

A store manager acknowledged the problem, saying an exterminator had made six previous trips to the pizzeria.

Since then, the Little Caesar's outlet has closed, and no mice have been reported at a new pizza place at the location.

And then there are the nagging problems with buffet bars.

Over the past year, the food on Wendy's buffet bar most often found at unsafe temperatures — taco meat — is no longer offered, said Mr. Lynch, the Wendy's vice president.

But he said the move was not because of violations; the tacos were simply not as popular as other items.

"We're sticking strictly with the salad bars," he said.

He added that in the future, he expects fewer violations at the dozen Wendy's restaurants in Toledo, which have undergone extensive remodeling.

One reason for Wendy's higher number of violations may be a menu that offers a wider range of food, opening more possibilities for violations, said Mr. Lynch. Other chains have not offered the full buffet bars.

"I'm not making up excuses. But there may be some reasons we showed more [violations]," he said.

This is not to say that all Wendy's have had poor marks. The outlet at 3360 Glendale Ave. has had fewer than one violation per inspection, and the Main Street outlet has averaged two.

Pizzerias get top inspection grades

For the best inspection marks, look toward pizza places.

They account for 13 per cent of all restaurants in Toledo but less than 2 per cent of food-poisoning complaints.

And their inspection marks are far and away better than other kinds of eateries.

A likely reason for the good scores: Many pizza places specialize in a single food.

The pizza chain with the best marks: Marco's, with 1.3 violations per inspection. The one with the most: Little Caesar's, with 3.8.

Many of those violations stemmed from cleanliness problems — dirty floors and kitchen equipment — and not temperature infractions.

The pizza chain's average number of violations were still lower than those at traditional restaurants.

"In our restaurants, we take immediate action to correct all violations," said Al Sebastian, spokesman for the national chain.

Pizza Hut, which scored well in The Blade analysis, works hard at keeping violations down, corporate officials said.

"I can't tell you how much we stress food safety," said Rob Dougherty, a corporate vice president in Dallas. "It's as important as anything we do."

Mr. Dougherty cited unannounced in-house inspections for the good scores. Even inspectors agree that pizza and fast-food restaurants are greatly helped by their internal inspections.

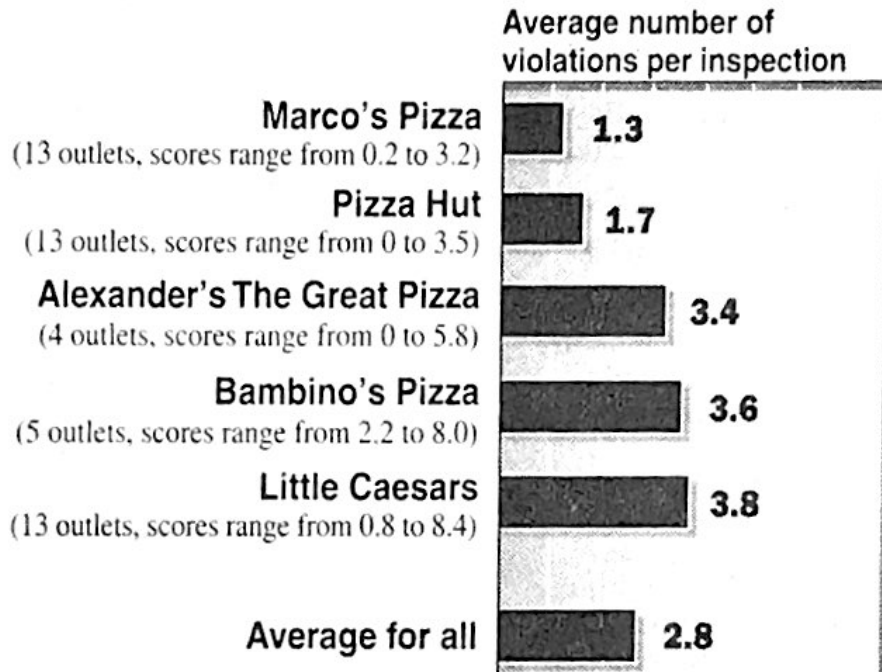
"They actually make our jobs easier," said Mike Oricko, chief of Lucas County's restaurant inspection program.

"As a rule, fast-food places are watched by the corporate people. So they tend to be in pretty good shape."

Among those surprised to hear that fast-food kitchens are cleaner than others: Cindy Meyers, the Start High teacher.

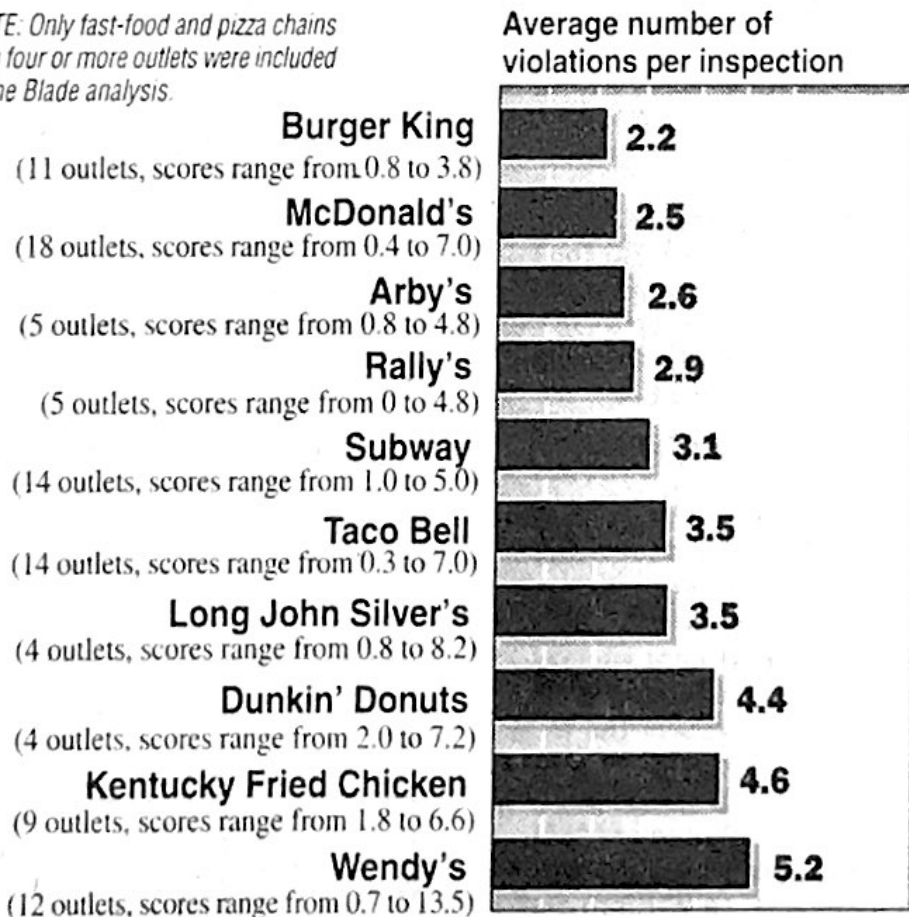
"Wow, I had no idea," she said. "This is good for me. Now, I won't have to feel so guilty when I go out and get fast food for my teenage daughter."

Violations at pizza places



Violations at fast-food outlets

NOTE: Only fast-food and pizza chains with four or more outlets were included in the Blade analysis.



SOURCE: Toledo Health Department annual inspections from 1990-1994.

BLADE PHOTO BY ALLAN DETRICH



From generation to generation Toledoans have turned to fast food for more of their meals. Cindy Meyers, a Start High School teacher, and her daughter, Brooke, enjoy a quick meal at the McDonald's on Laskey Road.

Jack in the Box tragedy led to improved testing of beef

BY MICHAEL D. SALLAH
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For Jack in the Box restaurants, it was a nightmare: four children dead, hundreds of people sick. The cause: contaminated burgers.

The infamous food-poisoning outbreak in 1993 remains one of the worst disasters ever traced to a fast-food chain.

Now, two years later, the burger chain still struggles from the losses — tens of millions of dollars — that were to follow from the national publicity.

"We have not made a full recovery," acknowledges Shirley Gines of Jack in the Box's parent company, San Diego-based Foodmaker.

And people are still grieving.

A total of 477 people became sick, including a girl who still needs constant medical care because of severe organ damage.

"When you really look back on it, no one won anything out of that thing — no matter what the legal settlements were," says Don Pierce, a marketing consultant in Boynton Beach, Fla., who tracks fast-food trends.

It was a tragedy that would shake up all fast-food chains, forcing the big ones — McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's — to look for more sophisticated ways to test ground beef.

It was also a tragedy that would push federal regulators to propose revamping the way meat is tested for bacteria — even before it is delivered to restaurants.

And it is a story of how an entire fast-food chain — with more than 1,000 outlets — would pay the price for what just a few sold: tainted burgers.

"When it happens at one place, it can affect all of the other outlets, and that's exactly what happened," Mr. Pierce says.

During an investigation, it was learned that some Jack in the Box burgers had been tainted with E. coli bacteria, most likely during processing in the slaughterhouse.

Most of the bad burgers were sold at outlets in Washington state, Idaho, and California. There are no Jack in the Box outlets in the Toledo area.

BRIANNE KINER FOUNDATION



Brianne Kiner: Victim of Jack in the Box food poisoning

In the weeks after the outbreak, details of which were reported nationally, sales plummeted at the chain's outlets by about 40 per cent.

And Foodmaker's stock nosedived. Before the tragedy, it was trading at 13½. Now, it's at 5½.

People who were interviewed in a Foodmaker survey said they were afraid to eat at the once-popular chain.

There have been large court settlements to the victims by Foodmaker and its suppliers, including \$15.6 million to the family of Brianne Kiner, a 12-year-old girl whose organs were permanently damaged. It was the largest reported settlement in Washington state history.

Foodmaker, which owns 859 Jack in the Box outlets, mostly in the West, also has 384 franchised restaurants. Many of those owners sued Foodmaker two years ago, claiming \$100 million in lost business. The case was settled out of court for an undisclosed amount.

The victims were at the heart of the tragedy.

"There were so many grieving people," says Thomas Prentice, director of the Brianne Kiner Foundation in Seattle, a support group named after the injured girl.

She was in a coma for 42 days after eating one of the tainted burgers and now requires constant medical care.

Of the children who died, three were from Washington state and one from California.

Recently, Jack in the Box — through deep discounts and ad campaigns — has coaxed some customers back. In August, it reported a \$2.6 million quarterly earnings profit, the first since the outbreak.

"We feel this is just the beginning of a recovery," Ms. Gines says. "It's going to take a lot of hard work."

If there is a silver lining it is that the tragedy sparked federal regulators to push for new rules on how meat is tested. The rules are expected to be phased in over the next few years.

And Jack in the Box has implemented a strict hazardous control program — the first of its kind in the fast-food industry.

The chain now requires its beef suppliers to test the meat every half-hour for deadly bacteria — even before it's delivered to the restaurants.

Jack in the Box also requires its burgers to be cooked at 155 degrees, not at 140 as required in many states, including Ohio.

Some experts say E. coli is destroyed at 155 degrees and not at 140, the standard cooking temperature at Jack in the Box at the time of the 1993 outbreak.

"What we're doing in the area of testing should alert all fast-food franchises to the dangers of what can happen," Ms. Gines says.