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Maintaining Safety and Quality During Buffets

Buffet Lines

Buffet tables must be maintained in an appetizing and safe manner. Time and temperature abuses that allow microbial growth can cause displayed food to become hazardous and cause illness if consumed. To maintain quality of cold foods, use a cold rail and display cold foods 3 inches below the top of the rail. Salad bar refrigeration units with cold air flow is the best method of displaying and serving cold food items. Using ice in a mechanically refrigerated salad buffet bar is not recommended, because the ice acts as an insulator around food items.

Hot foods must be kept hot. Only enough vegetables to be served within 15 minutes and only enough meat, poultry, fish and casserole items to be served in 30 minutes should be placed on buffet lines. Foods on display should be replenished frequently.

It is wise to use sneeze guards for buffet service foods. This barrier does not guarantee that food will not become contaminated but it does provide a certain amount of protection against customer contamination. If a customer is sick with a viral respiratory infection and sneezes on the food, the virus can infect another unsuspecting customer who eats the food, even pastry and breads.

Policies must be established for employees to follow for buffet service.

Re-use of Tableware

The FDA Food Code prohibits re-use of silverware and plates on banquet, buffet, or salad bar self-service lines. Cups and glasses can be used again. The reason for this is that after a customer has used a plate and silverware, the tableware is contaminated. If customers return to a food line, put more food than they want on their plates and then return a small portion to the serving vessel, they can also contaminate the food on the buffet line.



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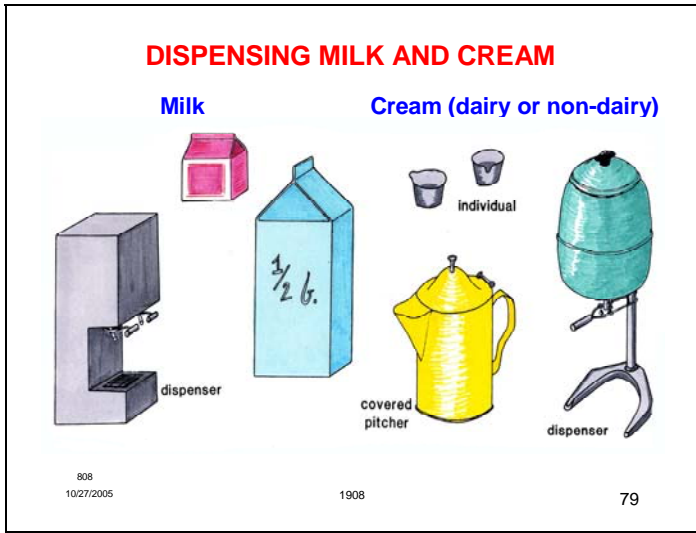
Carry-out Foods - Controlling the hazard

For quality assurance, customers must be informed how to treat food after purchasing. Customers must be told that the food is perishable and that it should be consumed promptly, refrigerated below 41°F, or kept hot (above 135°F).

The hazard associated with carry-out foods is that these foods often do not remain below 41°F or above 135°F while they are being transported from the place of preparation and sale to the place where they will be consumed. Poor packaging allows foods to change temperature rapidly. Foodservice establishments are legally liable for any take-out foods that are sold.

Control the hazards in carry-out foods by:

1. Packaging food as hot or cold as possible, using well-insulated packages. Pre-packaged food items should not come in contact with water or undrained ice.
2. Preparing, storing, serving, and packaging food, using methods for maintaining both the quality and safety of the food products.
3. Informing customers that the food should be eaten as soon as possible (within 30 minutes) to retain quality. If the food is to be consumed at a later time, it must be kept hot (above 135°F) or chilled and kept refrigerated, out of any bag, below 41°F.
4. Never using any food returned by customers. This food must be considered to be grossly contaminated and it must be discarded.



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Dispensing Milk and Cream - FDA Requirements

Dispensing Milk

Refrigeration units in milk dispensers inadequately maintain milk at cold storage temperatures. Milk should be removed from the dispensing units at the end of the day in order to avoid souring. Plastic tubing at the end of containers of milk should be cut at a 45-degree angle to allow the milk to flow freely. Blunt cuts on tubing can cause milk to back up in the dispensers. As a result, it will not be used and it will sour.

Dispensing Cream

An opened creamer is hazardous. Uncovered containers of cream are not permitted by law. Cream placed on tables must be served in covered containers. Covered cream containers must be checked and monitored on a regular daily schedule so that sour cream is never served. Only the amount of cream that the customer can be expected to use should be given out.

Individual non-dairy creamers should be considered potentially hazardous and must be refrigerated. Also, these containers are not tamper-proof, since someone could peel off the top (which breaks the seal) and then carefully push it back on so that it looks sealed.

References

NSF. 1978. Food Service Equipment Standards. National Sanitation Foundation, Ann Arbor, MI.

DISPENSING CONDIMENTS

Table / counter

Individual servings
Original container
Pour-type container



Self-service

Individual servings
Dispenser
Protected container
salad dressings,
cold sauces [$<41^{\circ}\text{F}$ (5°C)]



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Dispensing Condiments - FDA Requirements

Condiments, seasonings, and dressings for self-service must be provided in any of the following: individual packages, dispensers, containers protected from contamination by packaging, easily cleaned containers, serving line or salad bar protector devices, display cases, etc. Ketchup and other sauces may be served in the original container or in a pour-type dispenser.

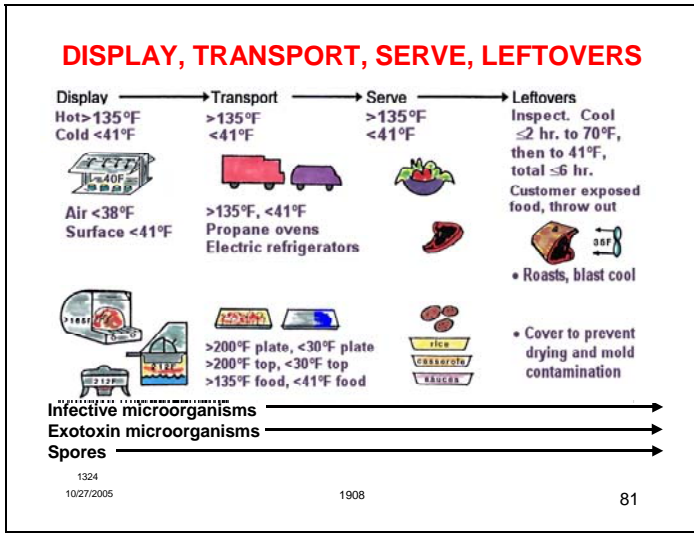
Ketchup bottles should not be refilled. Yeasts and molds in the air contaminate opened bottles of ketchup. If fresh ketchup is placed in a bottle containing ketchup that has been used to serve customers, the sensory quality of the ketchup will decline rapidly due to the rapid growth of spoilage microorganisms.

Pump dispensers must be cleaned daily to ensure consistent dispensing of condiments.

A regular rotation schedule for all condiments must be established. To ensure quality and avoid contamination, salt, pepper, sugar, and ketchup should be periodically emptied and/or changed.

Any product displayed in a container into which the customers can put a utensil they have had in their mouths must be thrown away when it is removed from the customer's table. For example, any salad dressings served in an open container or dish must be discarded.

Commercial salad dressings are usually microbiologically safe products because of their high acidity. However, these salad dressings can deteriorate as a result of yeast or mold growth and oxidation of lipids, which alters their flavor. These products should be dispensed in limited quantities and replaced after a prescribed period of time.



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Food Safety and Quality for Display, Transport, and Leftovers

Display, Transport, Serve, Leftovers

This stage in food handling is probably the most hazardous of all. In order to control both the safety and quality of food products the following procedures must be followed:

1. **Display.** Cold food must be kept below 41°F. The temperature of circulating air above food in salad bars and display cases should be less than 41°F. Ice under bowls of food in salad bars does not keep surface temperatures of food at less than 41°F.

Hot-held food must be above 135°F and kept covered in order to prevent evaporative cooling. Infrared lights and other types of heat lamps dry the surface of food products and do not maintain a safe surface temperature.

2. **Transport.** Food being transported must be above 135°F or below 41°F. All catering trucks should have propane ovens and/or electric refrigerators.

Under some very limited conditions it is possible to transport food in insulated boxes. If insulated containers are used, it is essential that the food be put in at a temperature of about 180°F or hotter in order to allow some heating of the box from the heat given off by the food. The hot food should be placed in the box and the lid must be kept closed until the food is served or the food will cool quickly.

The best method is to transport the food cold and reheat it at the delivery point. In hospitals and in large hotels, hot food can be transported satisfactorily for up to 15 minutes. In these conditions the food must be above 200°F, plated on a plate at above 200°F, and covered with a heated stainless steel cover at a temperature of above 200°F. If foods are to be kept cold, plates should be below 30°F, the cover below 30°F, and the food below 40°F. Chilled food can be reheated in various thermal and microwave ovens prior to serving.

Hotel room service food is transferred in aluminum tote boxes. It is common practice to put 1 or 2 sterno cans in the boxes to maintain the hot temperature of foods. Lighted cans of sterno are a non-uniform heat source; the

food either overcooks or gets cold. Lighted cans of sterno are also a fire hazard.

3. **Serving.** Food should be either served above 135°F or below 41°F.
4. **Leftovers.** The FDA Food Code recommends cooling food from 135 to 70°F within 2 hours followed by further cooling to 41°F (6 hours or less, total time). Roasts should be cut to less than 2 inches and panned less than 2 inches deep in order to facilitate rapid cooling to 41°F in less than 6 hours.

Customers should never be given hot food from a banquet to take home. The potential for abuse is great; home refrigerators are often inadequate for cooling food.

Infective Microorganisms

Handling of the food during transport, display, and service introduces infective microorganisms into the food. If the food is not maintained above 130°F or below 41°F, microorganisms will grow to levels that cause foodborne illness.

Exotoxin Microorganisms

Exotoxin-producing microorganisms such as *Staphylococcus aureus* can be introduced during transport and display. If given an opportunity for growth, they can produce toxins that are not inactivated when foods are reheated.

Spores

Spores are present in the food throughout the handling process. If the food is not maintained cold or hot, spores outgrow, multiply and cause foodborne illness.