Cooking Policy

Perhaps you have been running restaurants for twenty years. Or maybe you just graduated from a prestigious culinary school. You know what you're doing. So why did you still get a cooking violation?

Maybe it's time to create a cooking policy, so you can ensure that your employees know what to check, when to check it, and what to do if something isn't right.

First of all, what is a policy and how do you create a cooking policy for your food establishment?

A policy is a defined set of actions that minimize food safety risks. Although some small food establishments may have verbal policies, it is best to write your policies down.

Here are the key steps to consider when developing any policy:

- **Include the key people at the table**

- **Identify the most important steps in your processes**

- **Ensure that your policy includes corrective actions**

- **Revise the policy based on problems that arise, or as your food processes change**

Let's look at each of these steps more closely.

When writing your policy, make sure you are including the key people in your establishment, and also consider which staff members may be involved in each step. Who is your Certified Food Manager? Who is responsible for the safe cooking of food at your establishment? Do you have multiple shift leads who oversee your establishment throughout the day? If your establishment is part of a national chain that has uniform standards, you may want to include a regional manager or Quality Assurance personnel in writing your cooking policy.

Now let's take a closer look at the second point. Here are common operations in a kitchen. Consider various menu items that contain animal proteins and vegetables that arrive raw but are cooked at some point in your establishment. Where in your establishment could a cooking issue arise?

Preparation

Review food that is cooked ahead of service in your establishment. How do you ensure that they reach a safe cooking temperature during the preparation? Especially review animal proteins that may be blanched during preparation to "shorten" the cooking step immediately prior to service. Remember that animal proteins that do not reach the safe cooking temperature during an initial cook step must still be treated as raw.

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Consider the various food that is cooked in your establishment, including raw animal proteins and vegetables. List the safe cooking temperature for each of these food items, using information from the 2013 FDA Food Code as guidance. How do you ensure that this food is cooked to a safe temperature? Do you provide instructions for your employees on how hot to set the grill or the oven? Do you provide guidance about how long each item will need to cook, to facilitate food flow and minimize service time to consumers? Do you have employees check final cooking temperatures for each item before it is served to consumers, or perhaps log two or three cooking temperatures every hour? How do you ensure proper cooking temperatures during rush or high volume service times?

Service to Customers

Do any of your menu items contain raw animal food that is cooked by consumers at their table (or for take-out, at home,) during or after service, such as fajita meats or thin sliced raw animal proteins in pho broth? How do you verify that this food reaches a safe cooking temperature?

Ask these questions for each of these operations:

Who is responsible?

Who is involved in cooking food at your establishment? Who oversees the process? Who is responsible for execution?

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What needs to happen?
Include these minimum cooking temperatures for food safety:

Poultry: 165°F
Ground Beef: 155°F
Eggs and Fish: 145°F
Plant food for hot holding: 135°F

For items that do not fall into these categories, such as roasts, game animals, food that is served raw-as-ready-to-eat, (like sushi or seared steaks,) or if you are serving a highly susceptible population, please refer to the FDA Food Code, or call us, Maricopa County Environmental Services, for more specific information.

When does it take place?
Include pre-opening activities, cook-and-hold steps, cooking to service, or cooking prep between lunch and dinner.

Where does it occur?
Include all equipment that is used for cooking food, including ovens, grills, stationary kettles, deep fryers, microwaves, toaster ovens, hot boxes, crock pots, rice cookers or boiling water immersion pots.

How is this achieved?
This is where you can incorporate logs and documentation. Sample logs are provided as part of our toolbox. You may want to include steps about how thermometers are used and how staff will document temperatures.

As you review these key operational steps, consider whether it would make sense in your business model to write several policies for cooking. For example, you might write one policy for checking that equipment is working properly, and another to address staff behavior (e.g. removing food for service too soon during rush, or checking the thickest part of the meat).

Now for the corrective actions. This is the "what if…" step. What if something goes wrong? Your policy should state what actions are taken if proper cooking temperatures are not being achieved. You can include a space for writing in corrective actions on your logs.

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But don't stop here! Your cooking policy is a living document, and will change over time. When you discover areas of non-compliance in your establishment, use them as opportunities to improve, and return to your policy to incorporate the changes. In this way, you will continue to improve.

Also, you should regularly review the food you order, and your suppliers. Is your frozen breaded chicken still a fully cooked product? Do your chicken wings arrive fully cooked, or parcooked? Do your prepared items, like veggie burgers or chorizo, arrive fully cooked or do they contain raw eggs? When you identify changes, be sure to modify your own policy and your cooking processes in order to keep your consumers safe.

To summarize, here are the key steps to consider with any policy:

- **Include the key people at the table**

- **Identify the most important steps in your processes**

- **Check that your policy answers the questions: who, what, when, where, why and how**

- **Ensure that your policy includes corrective actions**

- **Revise the policy based on problems that arise, or as your food processes change**

Remember, if you don't train your employees on your cooking policy, it won't do much to help your establishment. Check out the next document, a Manager's Guide to training your employees.

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