

It Must've Been Something I Ate

Watching out for tainted food by BROBSON LUTZ, M.D. Foodborne illnesses crop up in all settings – neighborhood greasy spoons, catered elegant events, country clubs, and even James Beard-award-winning restaurants. When tainted food is consumed at home, the family gets sick. When something goes wrong in a restaurant, multitudes can suffer. Fortunately, food poisoning from restaurant dining is rare, but it happens. As a restaurant city, New Orleans lives by its reputation for good food. It happened with the hollandaise sauce at Galatoire's in the early 1980s. It happened at a gala for Democratic fundraisers co-prepared by a number of restaurants in the mid-1980's. It happened at Rocky and Carlo's in 2001. Lightning can strike the same place twice, but the inspection process and cleanup maneuvers make it unlikely that a once outed eatery will have reoccurring problems.



Salmonella-laden hollandaise sauce

"It was salmonella food poisoning. The health department came the day after people started getting sick. They tested everything we had left in the cooler and found salmonella in the hollandaise sauce," recalls Milton Prentice, the chef whose brain was the repository for

each and every treasured Galatoire's recipe when he resigned in 2003. "We had always used fresh eggs to make the hollandaise sauce, and that was the culprit. After that we switched to pasteurized egg yolks for the hollandaise, and it never happened again," adds the Rhode Island native, who has New Orleans family roots.

Bigwig Democrats and Bad Shrimp

Banquet food served offsite from established restaurants can be a problem. New Orleans was in the run for both the 1988 Democratic and Republican national conventions, but city funds for entertaining were low. "It was a big reception for the Democratic National Committee at Gallier Hall. We were trying to impress the national Democrats so that they would bring their convention here. They went home impressed the next day, and then some of them got sick," says former mayor Sidney Barthelemy. A public health investigation at the time traced the outbreak to bad shrimp. Barthelemy had tapped an associate to solicit donations from local food establishments. Apparently one restaurant donated a batch of tainted shrimp. The incident made national news.

Bell peppers and salmonella

Doctors at Chalmette Medical Center became concerned after several people with fever and diarrhea began showing up at their emergency room in March 2001. In less than a week, the hospital's ER treated several dozen patients for salmonella enteritis. At least six were hospitalized and one died. They notified the state health department. Public health sanitarian Jo McLean led an investigation that interviewed dozens of people who had developed gastrointestinal symptoms suggestive of Salmonella infection. There was a common thread – all had eaten at Rocky and Carlo's. McLean's inspectors found cooked food being kept at improper temperatures. One theory was that raw chicken had been stored in a cooler with cooked bell peppers. Salmonella-laden juice from the raw chicken dripped into a pan of cooked bell peppers, which were then reheated at a lower-than-recommended temperature.

The good news

Even though restaurant foodborne outbreaks are well-documented, the actual chances of acquiring food poisoning at a local restaurant are quite low. "I have been eating in New Orleans restaurants for decades, and I only remember getting sick once," says George Panky, an infectious-disease specialist at Ochsner Clinic Foundation. "It was the day after several of us ate at a restaurant on Carrollton Avenue. I called the health department. They sent out investigators, but they didn't find a thing." Actually, most folks are more likely to acquire foodborne diseases at home, even though the last food eaten usually gets the blame. In particular, fast-food establishments are often wrongly accused. Late one summer morning John Sexton pulled his car up to a drive-through window and ordered his usual – a sausage, biscuit and egg sandwich. This Northshore resident, whose name I have changed, returned home with his culinary delight and started eating. Five minutes after the first bite, he experienced the classic signs of abdominal distress – nausea and stomach cramps. His symptoms quickly progressed, and he felt a chill. Within an hour he was in a Northshore emergency room with "both end" problems – vomiting and diarrhea. Sexton was obviously in distress, but his physical examination revealed no clues as to the origin of his illness. His blood pressure, pulse and temperature were all normal. His abdomen was soft and non-tender. The ER doctor diagnosed gastroenteritis and "treated and streeeted" him, in ER parlance. A nurse injected a dose of Tigan for nausea and sent him home with instructions to avoid greasy and spicy foods for a few days. Nine days later he was in a doctor's office complaining of persistent stomach burning. The doctor's impression was "unspecified abdominal pain." Sexton was given a prescription for Prilosec and advised to try a bland diet with increased fluids. Instead, Sexton visited a lawyer and sued the fast-food restaurant.

Incubation periods

Foodborne bacterial illnesses have incubation periods ranging from several hours to several days. It is possible to have a single "tainted" egg sandwich, but in the absence of reported complaints from other customers, there is no epidemiologic evidence a foodborne infection. After reviewing all the records, a medical expert for the insurance company wrote: "The breakfast biscuit with egg and sausage did not cause gastrointestinal symptoms occurring within five minutes of consumption. If, indeed, his symptoms were due to some foodborne infection, the cause could have been any virus or bacteria he ate, drank, or touched for up to a week or two before the onset of his symptoms. "Sexton's subsequent complaints nine days after the ER visit could have been consistent with a multitude of gastrointestinal disorders including hiatal hernia, esophagitis, and peptic acid disorders." •