

Restaurant Grades Fail as a Consumer Tool

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Food safety is non-negotiable and a priority for restaurant owners here in San Angelo. We work closely with health department inspectors to ensure that our restaurants are operating under the highest standards of food safety. The inspection sheet, while a matter of public record, is really a working document that is not designed to serve as a guide post to consumers on the quality or food served in a restaurant.

The fact that a restaurant is open for business indicates that no health hazards exist at that establishment. If a restaurant poses a health risk, it is closed on the spot.

The San Angelo City Council is considering using a letter-grade system for food inspection which would be incorporated into the current demerit system which they deem counter-intuitive for consumers. However, with only two full-time and one part-time inspector on staff to process over 500 permits and conduct hundreds of inspections annually, it is unclear what expense the taxpayers will have to support to add this additional layer of bureaucracy.

While grades may initially appear useful to consumers, grading schemes unfortunately are not a reliable reflection of current cleanliness and safety in a restaurant. Moreover, grades absolutely cannot predict conditions – good or bad – when a consumer visits.

Restaurant kitchens are a constantly changing environment, and the last grade assigned may have no resemblance to actual conditions at any given time. Many violations are corrected before inspectors even leave, rendering a poor grade both punitive and an inaccurate. Conversely, good grades can rapidly change for the worse. Basing consumer decisions on grades is overly simplistic, unreliable, and creates dangerous false security.

The reality is a grade is based on a two hour inspection, lasts for an entire year, and does not state why that business received the grade it did. Additionally, these grades can have a significant, negative impact on a business. For example, restaurants in New York City that received a "B" grade reported loss in business up to 40 percent.

San Angelo restaurant inspection reports are currently easily accessible on the city's website and provide a clear record of the safety of any given business. Grades oversimplify food safety risk factors, ignore the complexities of food safety, and most importantly, cannot provide reliable, actionable consumer information.