

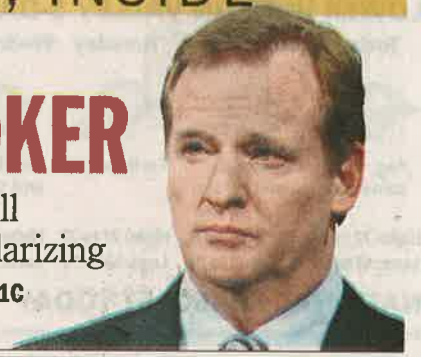
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FOOD SAFETY FOODIES TAKE NOTE!

You may be surprised by
what esteemed markets
are fined for failing
safety inspections



Clockwise from top right: Kui Jin, manager of the fish department, retrieves lobster for customers at H Mart supermarket in Hartsdale; a worker prepares produce at H Mart; George Chung of the Bronx, a baker at Stew Leonard's in Yonkers, makes bagels; an employee packages meat at H Mart; Barbara Bucknam, a food safety officer for Stew Leonard's, walks through the baking department while Maria Munoz and Antonia Paredes place labels on goods; produce at H Mart supermarket; a food safety officer checks the temperature of a refrigeration unit. H Mart was cited by state health inspectors last year, but Stew Leonard's received no critical violations. PHOTOS BY RICKY FLORES, TANIA SAVAYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS

MORE ONLINE
To see a database of grocery store inspections in Westchester, Rockland and Putnam, go to http://data.lohud.com/watchdog/groceries_lohud.html.

By Ernie Garcia :: elgarcia@lohud.com

Foodies may hail Whole Foods in White Plains and H Mart in Hartsdale, but last year state inspectors failed both, giving them the region's biggest fines for food safety violations. The specialty markets, beloved by some shoppers for their vast aisles of organic and ethnic foods, were cited last year for improperly cleaned meat grinders and excessively scored cutting boards — critical violations that contributed to each store receiving fines of \$3,000, state records obtained by The Journal News show. The stores are among 1,495 establishments in Putnam, Rockland and Westchester visited over the past five years by inspectors from the state Department of Agriculture & Markets, the agency that regulates retailers selling and preparing food. Most of the inspections occurred in delis or convenience stores such as New Cindy Mini Market in White Plains and Josie Deli Grocery in Port Chester, which also got \$3,000 fines. In Rockland, two businesses with the biggest 2012 fines of \$1,800 each

THE BIGGEST FINES BY COUNTY

- WESTCHESTER**
\$3,000
- ROCKLAND**
\$1,800
- PUTNAM**
\$1,200

See **FOOD**, Page 7A

FOOD: Few can avoid minor violations

Continued from Page 1A

were in Spring Valley: Levy Supermarket and Neiman's Kosher Fish.

Three Putnam businesses tied for the biggest 2012 food safety fine of \$1,200: Putnam Valley Lizzies and Tompkins Deli, both in Putnam Valley; and A&S Mini Mart in Mahopac.

No matter how clean a store might appear to shoppers, state inspection records show that most venues end up with some kind of violation, usually for minor issues. State law requires that supermarkets be inspected annually.

"Ninety-seven percent of the larger supermarkets in (the) three-county area have passed our most recent inspection, which means there were no critical deficiencies," said Steve Stich, director of food safety and inspection at the Department of Agriculture & Markets.

The state agency has about 95 inspectors who conduct more than 30,000 annual inspections statewide at all the food establishments and wholesale food manufacturers that hold state permits. The Journal News obtained data on five years of inspections through a Freedom of Information Law request.

Many violations cited by inspectors in the region's markets are for general deficiencies like missing hand-washing signs in employee bathrooms, cracked tiles in floors or dusty shelves. The top violation is insufficient space.

"That just means that food might be stored against a wall so you can't clean properly," Stich said.

Critical violations, which can cause a store to fail an inspection and trigger a reinspection, are for issues like vermin, meats stored at improper temperatures, incorrectly sanitized utensils in food preparation areas and ready-to-eat food prepared by workers not wearing gloves.

Jung Ki Kim, H Mart's inspection compliance associate, attributed the critical violations to the newness of the store and its employees.

"(The) Hartsdale store opened up in March 2012, and the newly hired employees lacked training on food safety and proper maintenance of food equipment," Kim wrote in an email, adding that corrective measures included employee training and internal inspections. "We will try our best for all of our stores to be in compliance with food safety regulations, and we do not foresee these unfortunate incidents to occur again."

Michael Sinatra, a Whole Foods spokesman, said the employees who work in the departments where the critical violations occurred were immediately retrained and new cutting boards were purchased.

"While it is considered a critical violation, it was something that was done that day. The meat was ground in the store, and it wasn't something we were doing over a long period of time," Sinatra said of the Aug. 14, 2012, critical violation for hardened residue on the chicken grinder and sausage tuber, which according to the inspection report was properly cleaned and sanitized on the spot.

Stich said state inspectors are trained to tell the difference between recent and old food accumulations on grinders and other equipment.

Yonkers resident Haifa Bint-Ka-



Neiman's Kosher Fish got one of the largest fines in Rockland in 2012. ERNIE GARCIA/THE JOURNAL NEWS



Levy Supermarket in Spring Valley, now closed, failed three health inspections in 2012. ERNIE GARCIA/JOURNAL NEWS

"Ninety-seven percent of the larger supermarkets in (the) three-county area have passed our most recent inspection, which means there were no critical deficiencies."

STEVE STICH

Department of Agriculture & Markets

di considers H Mart and Whole Foods to be very clean.

Bint-Kadi said she prefers H Mart's organic produce section to the one at Whole Foods because H Mart doesn't run out of organic produce as often.

H Mart also is popular with shoppers because staffers often offer free samples of Asian foods from little stands in the store. Gleaming displays offer sushi-grade fish and traditional Korean foods prepared in a kitchen visible to shoppers; there is also an expansive food court.

"It seems that there is an intention to keep the store clean," said Bint-Kadi, an artist. "We often eat there, and I've never had any issue."

Ossining resident Nikolai Burlakoff, an author finishing a book on borscht, also said he found H Mart "incredibly" clean.

"It's a joy to walk into the produce aisle. The choice is wider than in a local American supermarket," said Burlakoff, who buys Taiwanese cabbage there.

When told H Mart had an Aug. 6, 2012, critical violation for having ready-to-eat meat entrees at room temperature on tables, Burlakoff said eating meat or cheese at room temperature is normal in some countries. State law requires ready-to-eat food with meat to be held above 140 degrees Fahrenheit or below 45 degrees.

"This is the kind of thing where you have traditional cultural practices running afoul of what I call orthodox health laws," Burlakoff said.

Levy Supermarket, also known as N.Y. Farmers Market at 208-10 N. Main St. in Spring Valley, failed all three of its inspections in 2012, with nine critical violations for vermin, filthy sinks, putrid meat and dirty cutting boards, among other lapses. A reinspection Jan. 15 found no critical violations.

On Aug. 20 when The Journal News visited Levy Supermarket, the store was closed and the empty interior was strewn with debris and empty shelves. Mary Louis, a



Esther Barrera, a baker at Stew Leonard's. The store touts its inspection efforts and it had no critical violations in 2011 and 2012. RICKY FLORES/THE JOURNAL NEWS

Spring Valley resident exiting a nearby store, said the market had closed earlier this year.

"It was not clean. It smelled," said Louis. She said she had returned food she bought there that turned out to be spoiled.

Israel Neiman of Neiman's Kosher Fish said his wholesale store, which on a hot summer day reeked of stale seafood from the empty fish boxes piled in front of the building, tries to comply with state sanitary laws. The store got critical violations for dirty cutting boards as well as failing to have a hazard analysis and critical control points plan for its fish processing.

"A fish store is always dirty," Neiman said. The business has installed or will install a new ceiling, new doors, a new garbage shed and a concrete driveway to make it easier to clean the property better, he

said.

Staff is the key to avoiding critical food safety violations, said Barbara Bucknam, director of quality for Stew Leonard's in Yonkers, which had no critical violations in 2012 or 2011. Stew Leonard's offers its workers online food safety classes, training and state certifications. It safeguards its operations with weekly, monthly and overnight inspections.

Still, the human factor can foil every safeguard. "You're dealing with many people from many walks of life," Bucknam said. "If someone is rushing, having a bad day, a million reasons, they have that lapse and something happens. They forget to change a glove. They forget to cover something. It's the natural things people do. I don't know how you get around that."

Twitter: @Ernie_G_journo

BIGGEST FOOD SAFETY FINES

The state Department of Agriculture & Markets' biggest local fines in 2012 for food safety violations went to these stores:

\$3,000

H-Mart, Hartsdale

\$3,000

Josie Deli Grocery, Port Chester

\$3,000

New Cindy Mini Market, White Plains

\$3,000

Whole Foods, White Plains

\$1,800

Levy Supermarket, Spring Valley

\$1,800

Neiman's Kosher Fish, Spring Valley

\$1,200

A&S Mini Mart, Mahopac

\$1,200

Putnam Valley Lizzies, Putnam Valley

\$1,200

Tompkins Deli, Putnam Valley

FOODIES TAKE NOTE!



Employees prepare food at H Mart supermarket in Hartsdale Aug. 23. The store received one of the biggest fines last year, \$3,000, for critical food safety violations, which store officials attribute to insufficient staff training. The store correct ed the violations and on follow up no critical violations were found. TANIA SAVAYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS