

# A-list dining in L.A. County makes the grade

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The 10-year-old system for rating restaurant cleanliness and safety is termed a success.

Curry Mendes moved to Los Angeles last week from New York, where he had picked restaurants based on word of mouth and Zagat reviews.

But he quickly learned that many people in L.A. choose restaurants based on the big letter grade affixed by the L.A. County Department of Public Health to the front of nearly 38,000 restaurants and other businesses that sell food ready to eat.

## FOR THE RECORD:

Health official: An article in Thursday's California section about Los Angeles County's program of inspecting and issuing letter grades to restaurants and other food outlets identified the director of the county Public Health Department as Dr. Michael Fielding. He is Dr. Jonathan Fielding. —

"In New York, it's about how the place looks," said Mendes, 40, as he ate a smoked turkey and brie sandwich at a sidewalk table at Pete's Cafe & Bar in downtown Los Angeles. "But if there's a health letter grade here, I'm going to look for it."

And he's not alone.

It's been a decade since Los Angeles County became one of the first areas in the nation to institute a letter grade system aimed at helping diners determine the cleanliness and safety of restaurants.

This week, the county released data suggesting the program has been a success.

In the first six months of the program, which began in 1997, 39.9% of restaurants earned the 90 to 100 inspection points required for an A. By mid-2007, 82.5% of restaurants merited the top mark.

The record has improved even though the grading system has become more stringent over the years, health officials said, making the A's posted in restaurant windows today harder to earn than those handed out earlier.

The report also found that, from 1997 to 2007, the number

of inspection scores lower than 70 -- less than a C but not designated by a letter grade -- decreased by more than 98%. Only 0.2% of restaurants had to post a below-70 score during 2006-07.

The program includes all unincorporated areas in the county, plus the 77 of the 88 incorporated cities that have opted to join (the city of L.A. is the largest in the county to participate). Health officials said they inspect all food outlets in those areas every year -- 37,880 in 2006-07. Full-menu restaurants are checked up on three times a year, while convenience stores get one visit. Establishments that have performed poorly in the past get an additional inspection.

Andrew Casana of the California Restaurant Assn., which has 33,000 members in the county, said restaurant owners put a premium on earning an A. And he is not surprised that more of them are doing so.

"It makes perfect sense," he said. "Before the letter grade, inspections were simple and quick. What's happened in the last 10 years is the inspection sheet has grown from half a page to four pages. Inspectors are very, very thorough."

At the onset of the program, health inspectors used a form that had 42 inspection categories; today, inspectors use a form that has 71, according to Terrance Powell, director of special operations and planning for the public health department.

That makes Marie Ricci feel safer at restaurants.

"I definitely pay attention to the ratings," said Ricci, 52, who was lunching at Pete's on Wednesday. "I would definitely never eat at a restaurant that's a C. A B's a maybe."

Ricci, a county Mental Health Department employee who lives in Pasadena, gestured approvingly at the A grade in Pete's window before returning to her carbohydrate-free hamburger.

Pete's executive chef, Nick Shipp, is one of the restaurant's county-certified food handlers. The program requires that at least one trained staff member be on site at all times.

"Your health is in our hands," Shipp said. Letter-grading "definitely keeps us on our toes, and the health department is pretty on top of it."

Though Pete's has not had a grade below A in the five years since it opened, Shipp said he'd be willing to eat at a restaurant with a B rating. The best way to tell how clean a restaurant is, he

said with a laugh, is to check the bathrooms.

Brian Gregor, 29, an IT specialist and another Pete's patron, said he's skeptical of the grading system.

"It doesn't really matter to me if the food's great," Gregor said. "Even at an A restaurant, you don't know what's going on back there."

Dr. Michael Fielding, head of the public health department, said he understands the concern.

"The grades are only a point in time," he said. "But we also rely on consumers to call us if they see something that is wrong, and within 24 hours we investigate every single complaint."

The program was the brainchild of county Supervisor Mike Antonovich, who saw a need for the public to have information about sanitary conditions in food establishments, said Tony Bell, the supervisor's spokesman.

Antonovich "wanted a user-friendly system that allows consumers to make informed decisions," Bell said. "It's changed the modern lexicon of eating out -- B or A or C tonight?"

The report described a 2001 survey of county residents which showed that 84% had heard of the grading system and 77% noticed posted grades most or all of the time. Only 3% said they'd eat at places with a C grade; only 25% would go to restaurants with a B in the window.

The report suggested the program may also be responsible for a drop in food-borne illnesses that resulted in hospitalization. In 2000, there were about 13% fewer hospitalizations in L.A. County for food illness than in 1993. No more recent data were available.

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*Times staff writer John Spano contributed to this report.*