

# Inside

# *the life of a*

## Food Safety Inspector

It was 8:30 in the morning, and the guy on the phone sounded a little rough. He introduced himself as Mark, and was calling Clara to complain about a dinner he'd eaten last night. He'd felt terrible when he got home, and was wondering if he could get his money back. Clara asked him a few questions about the restaurant and the meal, and then asked if he'd had anything to drink. "About four or five beers, I guess", he replied. Clara sighed to herself. She took his phone number and said she would contact him if she heard any other complaints about the restaurant. "But can I get my money back?"

"I very much doubt it, sir."

Clara didn't often receive calls like that – but even people within the food service industry had misconceptions about her job. Many thought of a Food Inspector as a sort of kitchen cop – and although

sometimes that's what it came down to, it only happened as a last resort. Her job was really about prevention – to protect the public from food-borne illnesses – and the best way to achieve that was to educate food handlers about safe practices.

Once Clara had dealt with some emails, she packed up what she needed for the day and headed to her first meeting. Organizers were planning a weekend walk for breast cancer in which 5,000 women were expected to participate. Not only that, but the women were camping overnight in a park, and organizers were going to feed them dinner cooked on



location, as well as breakfast the next morning. This morning's meeting was to try to cover all the bases that might affect the safety of the food.

The main course was chicken – always a risky food if precautions aren't taken – and it was to be cooked over an enormous charcoal fire. Clara began by asking some specific questions: Where were they getting power from? How many portable toilets would be brought in? What hand-



washing facilities would be made available? Would food handlers have access to running water? How many steam tables would be provided? Last year inspectors had had to shut down five out of eight steam table lines because the tables weren't hot enough. That was one of the cardinal rules of food safety: while food was waiting to be served, it had to be kept hot enough (above 140 degrees C) or cold enough (below 4 degrees C) to inhibit bacteria.

They also discussed breakfast, to be served at 5 AM. Clara knew it would be a short night's sleep for her. She would be at the park at dinnertime with three other inspectors, and then awake at 4 AM to come and inspect breakfast. She also knew that the participants and organizers appreciated it – she had been personally thanked by both.

The walk for breast cancer was one of dozens of events that kept Clara busy from mid-May to mid-October – including multicultural festivals, the Gay Pride parade and numerous concerts and street fairs. If even one vendor sold tainted food at such an event, it could land a couple of hundred people in hospital. So it was a busy time of year for Clara – and because such events happened mainly on weekends and evenings, her job was anything but 9 to 5.

After the meeting, Clara started an afternoon of

routine inspections. She enjoyed seeing lots of different foods prepared in different ways, and could usually walk away from an inspection feeling good about the visit. In fact, her first stop today was a restaurant she had inspected three months ago, and it had been a mess: the toilets weren't working properly, there was no water for hand washing, and there were droppings and chewed-up food on the floor. Then, when she opened the spice cupboard, mice had come running out. Clara had walked back out to the dining area, looked at all the people eating there, and had shut the restaurant down.

Within 24 hours, though, a request for another inspection had been made, and she couldn't believe her eyes: the plumbing had been fixed, an exterminator had been in, and the place was not just spotless – it had been painted. Returning to such a place after a few months Clara never knew what to expect – some operators just let things slide, as if the safety of their food only mattered if they were found out. But when she arrived, the manager greeted her and showed her into the kitchen with pride – it was clean and well-maintained, and looked like a place people cared about.

While she was there she asked the chef to describe the steps in preparing prime rib roast, to check for safety concerns. He explained how they rolled the roast in a marinade, let it sit for twenty minutes and cooked it until the internal temperature was 140 degrees C. Her one question

concerned the marinade, which would contain raw meat juices after use: did they throw it out, or save it at room temperature for later? The chef assured her that they threw it out. She thanked him for his time, and walked out past the patrons – knowing that the way the diners expected the kitchen to be run was actually the way it was now.

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**This is one in a series of fictionalized role stories sponsored by Toronto Public Health and the Ontario Public Health Association, and funded by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.**

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