

MAKING THE GRADE

BY BOB DODA

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While the city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) officials are cleaning up restaurants throughout the city, restaurant owners are claiming their wallets are being cleaned out at the same time.

Starting in July 2010, the DOHMH made it a requirement for restaurant owners to post the letter grade results of their sanitary inspection.

The grading system is intended to bolster aptitude toward being as clean as possible, but many restaurant owners believe that the frequency of inspections and number of fines received are becoming increasingly unfair.

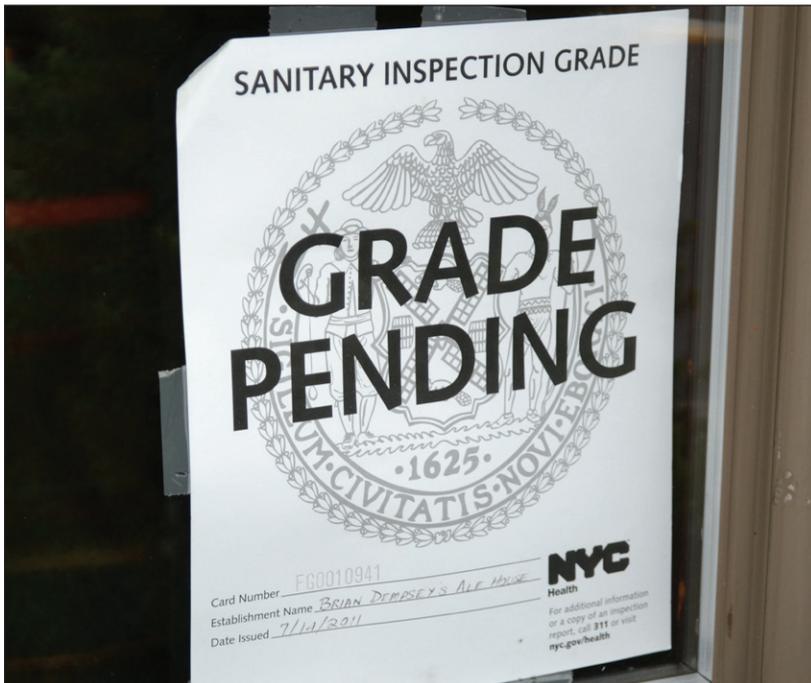
According to the DOHMH web site, when a restaurant improves between initial inspections, the department reviews it less frequently.

"In about a year, they came three times even though we had an 'A,'" said Dina Amatuccio, manager of Cascarino's in Bayside. "The codes change and they don't tell us. It's aggravating because they come here when it's really busy and it takes away from being able to pay attention to the customers. It's annoying."

Other restaurant owners in Bayside reported similar experiences with inspectors who, according to the DOHMH, are randomly assigned to specific eateries. One owner said that while an inspector may be paying attention to one area of violations, the next will concentrate on something completely different. A DOHMH spokesperson said that fines usually range from \$200 to \$2,000 based on severity of violations.

"We are just trying to survive here," said one Bayside owner, also displaying an 'A' in his front window.

He said that despite the grade, he has had to pay violations twice over the past



THE COURIER/Photo by Melissa Chan

Revenue collected from restaurant fines during the 2011 fiscal year reached \$42.5 million.

six months.

"The way they change the rules, I had to hire a guy just to make sure everything is perfect. I know they are trying to look out for the customer, but they should be more worried about places that have 'B' or 'C' ratings."

Inspection cycles are individual to each restaurant, based on its pattern of cleanliness, according to the DOHMH. Some inspections are based on customers' complaints or re-inspections from prior violations.

"The overarching goal of the restaurant letter grading program is transparency and food safety, not revenue or fines," said a DOHMH spokesperson. "The Department

is now inspecting restaurants that perform at 'C' grade levels about three times each year, 'B's twice, and 'A's, once per year. Each time a restaurant improves its score on its initial inspections, it can reduce the frequency with which it is inspected, and thereby decrease its potential to incur violations and pay fines."

One Long Island City restaurant owner who received a 'B' inspection grade believes that the system is too ambiguous for customers to understand.

"They see a low letter grade and they automatically think the restaurant is dirty," said the owner. "We have a 'B' because we didn't have the appropriate paperwork on

file. Consumers see the grade and they think the worst . . . Personally, I like the grading system. I think restaurants should put out high-quality food that is safe for the public and is held to a certain standard. I thought it was great until I saw the way they were doing it. They come in for an inspection, find something, fine you and then another inspector comes in and doesn't inspect what the last guy inspected. He just finds something new and fines you for it."

During the 2011 fiscal year, revenue collected for fines from food service establishments reached \$42.5 million dollars, according to the DOHMH. The Health Department anticipates a five percent reduction in fines collected each year for the next two years going forward.

In January, Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced a fine relief program designed to reward those who got an 'A' grade on initial and re-inspections with no fines.

Still, restaurant owners have a different take on inspections.

"I think there's a lot of miscommunication on the inspector's end," said Chris Evans, co-owner of Press 195 in Bayside with an 'A' grade. "You'll get a story that something is wrong and we'll correct it. Then, another inspector will come and say that's not how it should be done. You'll be told to do one thing and they fine you for it the next time."

"Inspectors are really going rogue at this point," said the previously-mentioned Long Island City restaurant owner. "I think the bottom line is that the city needs money . . . for us small places, these fines are killing us."

Restaurant grades throughout the city, including all recorded violations as well as statistics from the first year of grading implementation, can be found by visiting www.nyc.gov/health.

— With additional reporting by Melissa Chan and Steve Mosco

Douglaston Fairway weeks away

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To the delight of grocery shoppers in north-east Queens, Fairway Market in Douglaston is only weeks away from its grand opening.

On November 16, Fairway — located at 242-02 61st Avenue in the Douglaston Plaza Shopping Center's Lower Level — will take over the closed Waldbaum's with 56,000-square-feet of wall-to-wall food products, fresh produce, a butcher shop, a 60-seat cafe and much more.

According to Howie Glickberg, Fairway's third generation CEO, over 300 jobs have been added to the local economy, including expert department heads.

"The Douglaston area is, what I call, a food desert," said Glickberg. "For whatever reason, there are just not a lot of food stores in that area. We are really going to shake everybody up."

Glickberg says that Fairway is not your typical supermarket, as food products always come first. There will be household amenities available but the main focus will be on specialty imported items, organic and kosher foods, their full-service catering department and dozens of prepared hot foods from Fairway's kitchen. From the family's humble beginnings with a small fruit and vegetable stand in 1933, Glickberg has opened multiple Fairway Markets in the New York area, with the Douglaston location being the largest yet.

"Everybody is very happy and excited about the grand opening," said Susan Seinfeld, district manager of Community Board 11. "The sooner, the better."

The grand opening next month has been a process two years in the making after some zoning issues and a full renovation and expansion of the Waldbaum's building. The store will be open from 8 a.m. until 10 p.m. seven days a week.

Nominate your favorite in health and beauty



With the success of the recently-completed first leg of the Best of the Boro Competition: Bars and Restaurants, *The Queens Courier* is pleased to present the second category for nominations — Health and Beauty.

The competition places the power of choice with the people. Queens residents will get the chance to choose the nominees and decide who

is best. You vote, they win.

Health is your greatest asset, but sorting through the myriad of doctors is often a fool's errand. For those looking for an easier way, the Best of the Boro Competition can help.

The competition allows the borough's over 2 million residents to nominate the best in scores of health and beauty categories with the winners crowned "Best of the Boro."

The first phase of the Best of the Boro Competition was a hit, collecting over 58,000 votes. The winners will be announced in the October 27 edition of *The Queens Courier*.

Residents made their voices heard nominating and voting for their favorite bars, restaurants and catering halls. Now, we want the same enthusiasm in nominating the Health and Beauty category.

This category will include best dermatologist, dentist, pediatrician, physical therapist, hair salon, spa and veterinarian amongst a host of others.

Nominations will commence on *The Queens Courier's* web site — www.queenscourier.com — on October 20 and last through November 17.