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Raise the Bar

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raise the BAR
Lines begin to form outside the Campustown bars after 10 p.m. on Thursday nights. Students stand in semi-chaotic lines clenching colored plastic mugs, waiting to catch a cheap buzz and begin the phenomenon that is mug night. With 14 bars in a two-block radius, deciding which one to go to can be a challenge. Stumbling between bars on Welch, students don’t think twice when their feet stick to floors, their mugs are used as ice scoops or they have to squat and hover over seatless toilets.

On Sept. 11, 2012, health inspector Brian Church found cockroaches while on a routine inspection at Paddy’s Irish Pub and Sips. Even though exterminators had been on site since the first inspection, Church revisited Paddy’s and Sips 15 days later and found more roaches, forcing the adjoined bars to close for two days. The Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals is in charge of inspecting Ames food service establishments. The department allows inspectors to choose whether to revisit the site or allow the owners to mail in confirmation that the violations were addressed.

Outside of their disturbance factor, roaches themselves aren’t harmful to humans. However, they do pose a threat of contaminating anything they touch since they can carry microorganisms on their feet, says Lakshman Rajagopal, a hospitality, sanitation and safety professor at ISU.

“Presence of roaches indicates issues with pest control, cleaning of establishments and poor oversight of cleaning in all areas,” says Rajagopal. “It is possible that the building by itself might be defective.”

Three days after Paddy’s and Sips reopened, Church found cockroaches while inspecting Chasers. This time the nature of the bar’s violations only warranted mail-in proof that they were dealt with, says David Werning, public information office for the DIA. No record of the bar’s mail-in report is available online.

Before being cited for roaches, the three bars’ last routine inspection reports show comments like “entire facility needs better cleaning and maintenance” for Chasers; Paddy’s and Sips received specific instructions to “clean & maintain bars better!!!” Even with these notes, it was almost two years before the bars were visited by another inspector. This is a common inspection frequency for bars that don’t serve food, which are considered to hold less risk to consumers.

Bars are classified as food service establishments under the Iowa Food Code, which are required by law to be inspected once every six months or on a risk-based inspection frequency. “The risk-based system allows [inspectors] to focus on establishments with the greatest risk to the consumers,” Werning says. Food preparation increases the risk of cross contamination, as employees touch raw foods and have to maintain higher standards of sanitation to avoid spreading bacteria.

Whether bars prepare food or not, they can still present a risk to consumers. “There are other sources of contamination, which are always there,” says Rajagopal. “People think that if there's alcohol [all germs] will die, but if your beverage is contaminated, you can't just kill it.”

Food contact surface violations are the most common in restaurants. They can easily be prevented if employees are trained in proper sanitation methods. “If somebody were to get sick and it’s traced back to your bar, that’s a lot of financial loss that you might have. It’s actually much easier to do these small things. We cannot control the guests, but we can control our employees,” Rajagopal explains.

Inspection reports for all Ames bars dating back to 2005 show that inspections are normally done between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.—before many bars in Ames even open their doors for business. This leaves a bar’s management responsible for ensuring their employees know and follow proper sanitation methods, as inspectors aren’t likely to come in when employees are serving. To Werning, the timing of inspections doesn’t influence what inspectors find. “When we
find it, if there’s a problem, it generally occurs whenever inspectors are there. You don’t have to have a standing-room-only crowd to do an inspection,” Werning says.

Collin Wientjes is a junior in hospitality and event management and a manager at the Oak View Restaurant in Polk City. To him, doing inspections when a restaurant isn’t open for business only shows part of the establishment’s sanitation. “Not only should you inspect the bar area, you have to inspect the people that are working there; whether they’re washing their hands or touching things and cross contaminating them,” says Wientjes. “The cross contamination with other humans is ridiculous and needs to be observed.”

Werning says there aren’t any problems in Ames that can’t be found in other places across the state. However, students like Wientjes don’t think Ames bars are held to a very high standard compared to bars in places like Des Moines, Iowa City and Omaha. At the same time he says he’s more likely to walk to a Campustown bar than drive or catch a bus to bars on Main Street, which he thinks are “generally cleaner and nicer.”

For Charlie Yoke’s co-owners Jason Crimmins and Michael Roberts, cleanliness is a top priority. The bar staffs 10 employees until 3:30 a.m. or 4 a.m. to close the bar on weekend nights, ensuring it’s clean and ready to open for lunch at 11 a.m. the next day. “From a cleanliness standpoint in Campustown, I think that everyone around here is dealing with old buildings that pose unique problems and everyone just needs to make … general building maintenance and cleanliness more of a priority,” says Crimmins. “The cleaner you keep your place the more your patrons are going to respect it. Do I think kids are going to drink in a dirty bar? Yeah, probably. Do I think if given the option they’d rather be in a cleaner one? Most times.”

**what to bring to keep you {clean}**

**clean mug**
Bars aren’t responsible for your mug, so make sure you are. Some bars use mugs as ice scoops; act accordingly.

**hand sanitizer**
Having this on hand will eliminate the problem created by soapless bathrooms.

**handkerchief**
If you’ve got a cough, arm yourself with something to stifle it for everyone else’s sake.

**wet wipes/tissues**
If you don’t want to contract anything break these out whenever it seems necessary. They can also double as toilet paper, which can be hard to come across.
Most common critical violations:

**Food contact surfaces:** Something didn’t get cleaned right, or food wasn’t stored properly.

**Handling/storage/labeling of toxic items:** Poisonous or toxic materials were kept too close to food, equipment, utensils or linens.

**Cold hold:** Safe temperatures weren’t maintained in the fridge.

**Plumbing: installed/maintained:** Plumbing either wasn’t designed, constructed or maintained according to the state or local law.

**Cross-contamination protection:** Cooked and raw food were a little too close during storage, preparation or display.

**Others include:** Hygienic practices, pest control, incorrect date labeling, lack of hot or cold water pressure, well-working appliances.