

# Kitchen where Chicken & Rice Guys prepared food had a history of problems

Chicken and Rice Guys on Harvard Ave.

By **Megan Woolhouse** GLOBE STAFF MAY 11, 2017

Health inspectors who visited the Somerville kitchen where the Chicken & Rice Guys chain prepared its food found a rodent infestation and evidence the chain's food trucks were routinely supplied with water from a bathroom faucet, according to a health inspector's report.

The facility, Union Square Kitchens, which is used by several food businesses, also has a history of health problems including a forced closure two years ago for critical health code violations and "generally poor cleanliness," according to health inspection reports.

Chicken & Rice Guys has been barred from using the kitchen commissary. But health inspectors have allowed the other food businesses that use the space — a mix of small caterers and private food organizations — to continue to use the facility, saying that there was no fear of cross-contamination among vendors.

The problems at the Somerville facility offer another set of clues as investigators continue to search for the cause of the E. coli outbreak that sickened 15 people and shuttered the Chicken & Rice Guys restaurants and food trucks on April 11.

Thus far, officials have not determined the source of the outbreak, and the owner of the kitchen says it has been cleaned three times since the discovery.

“We work really hard, we keep the place spotlessly clean and make sure everything is up to code,” said Ciaran Nagle, the owner of Union Square Kitchens, which he says is also known as the Foundation Kitchen. “Our facility has remained in good order from the moment this happened.”

The chain’s restaurants have reopened after follow-up inspections, but the food trucks remain off the road as health officials try to unravel where the problems began.

Health experts have said the exact source of the outbreak may never be identified because by the time tests are conducted, the bacteria involved have often run their course and disappeared.

The state halted the Chicken & Rice Guys operations at the commissary in mid-April. Then, health inspectors for the state and the City of Somerville visited the facility, at 121 Washington St., and found rodent droppings in a water heater closet in the cooking area and insufficient heating and cooling systems for the 400 to 600 pounds of raw chicken Chicken & Rice Guys had been cooking there daily.

The inspectors detailed those findings in a May 3 letter to Union Square Kitchens’ owner, more than three weeks after the outbreak was linked to the Chicken & Rice Guys.

The letter also said the commissary allowed the chain to use a garden hose connected to a bathroom faucet to fill water tanks on board its food trucks, a hazard because there may not be a “backflow” prevention device in such a plumbing system and because garden hoses may not be corrosion-resistant.

“They’re getting water from the bathroom; that’s a no-no,” Ade Solarin, deputy director of Somerville’s Inspectional Services Department, said in an interview.

Nagle, the kitchen's owner — and a producer for The Three Irish Tenors, as well as the former male lead singer in Riverdance — said Wednesday that the Chicken & Rice Guys will not be allowed to return to the commissary and must find a new prep kitchen, regardless of the outcome of the E. coli investigation.

Ian So, Chicken & Rice Guys chief executive, confirmed the chain will no longer use the commissary but declined to comment further.

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Nagle said he did not see any cause for concern about the other vendors' operations because the facility was cleaned.

Tenants include Nibble, a Somerville Arts Council initiative that offers cooking classes and occasional pop-up restaurants; and Olio, a catering company. Nibble declined to comment; Olio did not respond to requests.

In all, eight organizations operate there, though a list of those companies posted on Foundation Kitchen's website was recently removed.

A review of health inspection reports shows the kitchen has a record of critical health safety violations, starting shortly after it opened in late 2015.

Somerville health inspectors shut it down for three days in December 2015 after they found “mouse droppings everywhere” and noted that “all equipment needs to be cleaned of built up filth.”

“The establishment itself was in poor cleanliness,” inspector Ben Lipham wrote. “The floors and walls need to be thoroughly cleaned. Mouse droppings are everywhere.”

The kitchen was found in violation of city health codes again in February.

Inspectors at the time said another business, named Compliments, was cooking in the same space and at the same time as the Chicken & Rice Guys but was not authorized to operate there.

“The establishment was in generally poor cleanliness,” inspectors said again. “Since multiple businesses use the same space, at the same time, it creates a problem related to who cleans what.”

Nagle said he’s been quick to correct past problems.

Somerville officials said they did not have concerns that the entire kitchen facility could have been contaminated because the Chicken & Rice Guys used different equipment than the other tenants.

Solarin also said inspectors must build a case for closing a facility that has multiple violations and present those findings to the local Board of Health.

Complicating matters, there are questions as to who is ultimately responsible for overseeing the safety of the commissary.

Denise Taylor, a spokeswoman for Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone, said Wednesday that any decision on the fate of the commissary was up to the state Department of Public Health, which led the investigation.

“The decision on whether to order the closure of Union Kitchens (the shared commissary kitchen) lies solely with MDPH,” she said.

But Michael Moore, director of food protection for the state, said that since the Chicken & Rice Guys are not a wholesale operation, all further enforcement action will be up to the city.

Meanwhile, the state continues to search for the exact source of the E. coli outbreak, which was linked to people who ate at the chain’s food trucks as well as its Allston restaurant.

Newly released City of Boston records show the outbreak sickened four students who ate at a food truck near Northeastern University.

Two lawsuits recently filed by people against the chain say they ate at its trucks in Copley Square and in the parking lot of Constant Contact Inc. in Waltham.

State health officials tested food from the Somerville kitchen, the trucks, the chain's four restaurants in Boston and Medford, and a pop-up kiosk at the Prudential Center, but they found no evidence of E. coli.

All Chicken & Rice Guys employees were also tested, including those who worked at the kitchen, and all came up negative.

SOURCE: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2017/05/10/kitchen-where-chicken-rice-guys-prepared-food-had-history-problems/BKYL7R3Ehbf8Etnsbl6SJ/story.html>