

MAKING THE GRADE



What do restaurant grades really mean?

You think you know but...



Every restaurant in New York City has a grade. And lots of people decide where to eat based on grades. But what do they really mean? And where do they come from? The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) worked with teaching artist Leigh Davis and students from the Lyons Community School to get the dirt behind the letters. They went out into the city to interview lots of people (health inspectors, chefs, consultants, and politicians) on making the grade.

It all begins when the city's [Department of Health](#) makes a surprise inspection at a restaurant to see if there are any food safety or sanitation violations.

tools of the health inspector's trade



kitchen thermometer



carbon monoxide detector



badge



portable citation printer



flashlight



The inspector is looking for violations, like:



FAILURE TO WASH HANDS AFTER SNEEZING



LEAKING CANS

USING THE BATHROOM WITHOUT WASHING HANDS



For each violation, the restaurant gets points. The worse the violation, the more points the restaurant gets.



At the end of the inspection, the inspector adds up all the points.



The restaurant gets a grade based on the number of points, according to a scale.



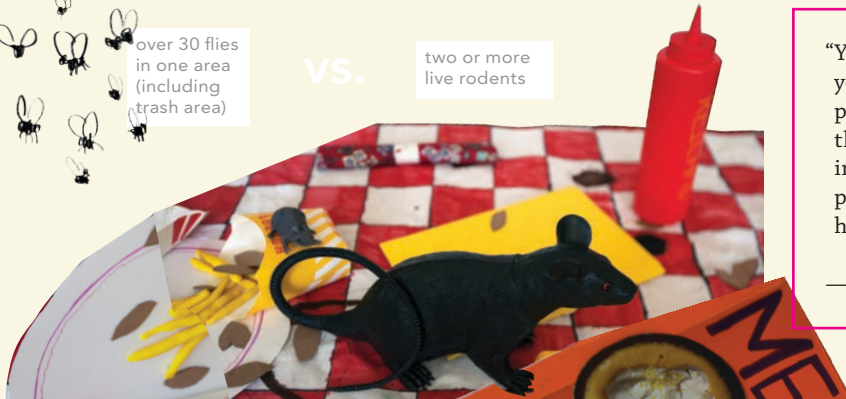
There's a pretty big range of points within each grade! A "C" grade can mean this:



over 30 flies in one area (including trash area)

vs.

two or more live rodents



If a restaurant does not get an "A" the first time around, they will receive a second inspection. If they still don't get an "A" after that inspection, they must post either the letter grade they've been given, or a "Grade Pending" sign until their final grade is decided at a special Health Department hearing.

"You could have a C with 28 points, but your neighbor could have a C with 75 points. People see C in the window; they get scared and don't want to go into the place. If it was up to me, I'd probably change the grading system to have A, A-, B+, B.."

—Michael Kelly, Restaurant Consultant



Seems straightforward, right?

“I think it’s a good system. It challenges chefs and owners to do things the right way. The [inspectors] that come in are always smart and really know what’s right and wrong.”

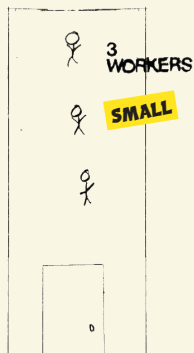
—James Kent, Chef,
Eleven Madison Park



Some things can put a restaurant at a disadvantage. For example, the size and type of restaurant can make a real difference:



40
WORKERS
LARGE



3
WORKERS
SMALL

“The system is slightly fair, but it could be better. An example being a restaurant that serves one coffee versus a big kitchen in a restaurant in a hotel. The smaller the restaurant, the easier to get an A.”

—Chanette Perry,
Inspector,
Department of Health



SIMPLE

COMPLEX



It also matters how much money the restaurant has to begin with.

Some restaurants hire lawyers to fight violations in court so they can bring their grade up.



Some restaurants hire consultants to help them prepare for inspections.



“We represent over 13,000 restaurants in court. When they get the violations we go to court and try to change their grades if they didn’t get an ‘A’ on the first time.”

—Michael Kelly, Restaurant Consultant

“You’re buying a VOWEL— It’s like wheel of fortune!”

—Frank, Bagelsmith



Restaurants could be at a disadvantage depending on where they are located.

“When we say borough bias, we believe that the city made a calculated effort to target businesses in the outer boroughs for revenue. They inspect a business, find a violation, and then collect revenue. What they did was target areas with language barriers and people with fewer resources to fight back.”

—Lydon Sleeper, Deputy Public Advocate

“Big restaurants have the advantage: they have money. Money solves a lot of problems. So when they build a restaurant up to standards, by design they’re in a very good position to get an ‘A’. Restaurants going into older buildings walk into a lot of hurdles: almost every building in the East Village probably has a mice problem.”

—Evan Huang,
Co-owner of BaoHaus



Here's what some of the people we interviewed had to say about the grading system and whether it's fair:

"It's very fair."

—Bryant Washington,
DOH NYC Sanitarian



"60% of the grades get changed... my opinion is it's a money making machine."

—Michael Kelly, Restaurant Consultant



"The grading system is fair, but the enforcement is not. It's inconsistent."

—Evan Huang, BaoHaus



"I think its pretty fair. I think its good to show people how the team is working. A place that has a C is not keeping food properly."

—James Kent, Eleven Madison Park



"I think it's arbitrary. It's geared towards revenue generation and not towards cleanliness, and that is wrong."

—Lydon Sleeper, Deputy Public Advocate



The [Center for Urban Pedagogy \(CUP\)](#) is a nonprofit organization that uses the power of art and design to increase meaningful civic engagement.

CUP's *Urban Investigations* are project-based afterschool programs in which public high school students explore fundamental questions about how the city works. Students collaborate with CUP and teaching artists to create multimedia teaching tools that reach audiences in the fields of arts and social justice.

To learn more about CUP, visit welcometoCUP.org

[Lyons Community School](#) is a small school in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, committed to providing a broad, stimulating experience in the liberal arts, and preparing students for college, healthy adulthood, and life-long learning.

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Lyons classroom teacher: Peter Litman

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