Take the gloves off, fight for sushi

opened Sushi Yasuda so that I could eat delicious sushi whenever I wanted. But now the cuisine I love is in danger: a well-intended but totally nutty provision in the New York City health code bars food workers from using bare hands when preparing raw food.

"Food shall be prepared and served without bare hand contact unless the food will be heated to a minimum temperature, says the code. The Health Department recently shut down David Bouhadana's Sushi Dojo in part over violations of this provision.

But all sushi chefs — if they are any good — use bare hands. When a health inspector pops in, the chefs slip on a pair of gloves, to the dismay of the poor customers who suddenly have to eat a meal made with latex gloves (at least until the inspector leaves).

Rather than play along with this charade, Bouhadana defied the rules — and paid the price.

The intent of the Health Department provision makes sense: protect diners from bad stuff getting on their food. But the reality is that the use of gloves in sushi preparation is unsanitary, dangerous and impractical. I would walk out of any sushi restaurant if the sushi chefs were wearing gloves. Here's why:

As concluded in a 2010 study published in the Journal of Food Protection, gloved hands "were more contaminated than were bare fingers and palms." That's in part be-

cause "glove use can create a false sense of security, resulting in more high-risk behaviors that can lead to cross-contamination."

Think of going into a deli and cringing when the glove-wearing sandwich-maker takes some cash, wipes their gloved hands on their soiled apron or grasps a dirty drawer handle.

Conversely, whenever sushi chefs feel tiny bits of debris on their hands, they immediately respond to that tactile sensation and clean their hands. With gloves, they are flying blind.

And repeatedly changing into new gloves "after handling raw foods... or any other work where the gloves may have become soiled or contaminated," as mandated by the health code, would mean hundreds of gloves being used over the course of a meal. Aside from the massive waste of using mountains of disposable gloves, this drill is not feasible.

Even if the chefs had time to change into new gloves every few minutes, the Journal of Food Protection study said that the effect on "skin during long-term glove use in food operations creates the warm, moist conditions necessary for microbial proliferation and can increase pathogen transfer onto foods through leaks or exposed skin or during glove removal." Yuck.

There's also the safety of the sushi chefs themselves, who engage in detailed, rapid and repeated knife work. With gloves, this activity can become dangerous.

And there's another problem: Gloves profoundly threaten the storied history of one of the world's greatest food traditions. Bare hands define sushi making, and for good reason.

Most importantly, sushi chefs use their hands to feel the various parts of the fish to determine if the surface texture and deeper flesh show signs of not being fresh. Gloved hands create a filter that renders this essential touch examination useless.

To make sushi taste good, sushi chefs need to feel the surface oil of a fish to determine how to best slice and prepare it. Gloves, in contrast, carry oils and flavors of one kind of fish and commingle them with other kinds of fish.

Further, without bare-hand contact, chefs cannot precisely determine how much pressure to apply to the mounds of rice before crowning them with fish or other toppings. This is critical, because while fish usually gets most of the attention, rice is the traditional focal point of a sushi meal. Master chefs fiercely guard their sushi rice recipes and techniques.

Even the relationship between the temperature of the sushi chef's hands and the temperature of the fish and rice plays an integral role in the creation of sushi. If a piece of fish is too cold, it will not be palatable. Therefore, the chef needs to be able to immediately discern the temperature of each piece of fish — as well as the sushi rice itself.

And finally, sushi chefs have thorough hygiene protocols. Along with regular hand-washing, they repeatedly coat their hands with lightly vinegar-washed water while making sushi. This prevents rice from sticking to their fingers, provides a flavor balance between the rice and fish and helps keep hands disinfected.

What should be done? Last year, the California state Senate unanimously passed a common-sense bill — signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown — that eliminated the requirement for the use of gloves in the preparation of raw food. They grasped that proper hand-washing, the simple and time-tested solution, is more effective and practical than the use of germ-spreading gloves.

The city's Health Department has demonstrated reasonable flexibility on a number of other related issues. Exempt sushi chefs from the glove mandate.

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