



OFF MENU

Home cook hesitation

BY STEPH RODRIGUEZ / stephr@newsreview.com

When free quesadillas were passed out at the annual UC Davis Picnic Day in April by Foodnome, a local network of home cooks, things got a little messy.

Isaac O'Leary, cook organizer with Foodnome and a UC Davis alum, said the group was simply trying to raise awareness for Assembly Bill 626, a new law that allows home cooks to gain a permit to operate microenterprises from their personal kitchens. On May 8, Foodnome received an email from Yolo County's Environmental Health Division warning it to cease operations.

O'Leary told SN&R that Foodnome, which connects local home cooks through its online platform, has been organizing private dinners and free food events to promote the bill, which took effect in January. AB 626, however, must be accepted by each county, and Yolo County has no desire to opt in at this time, according to April Meneghetti, director of the county's Environmental Health Division.

"Most environmental health professionals and public health

professionals are not in support of this," Meneghetti said. "And there's a lot of reasons behind that."

The concerns start with limits on health inspections. A health department inspects operating restaurants twice a year, unannounced. Under AB 626, home kitchens are only required to be inspected once, announced.

Another major concern Meneghetti noted is that home kitchens are exempt from displaying those green or red inspection certificates that tell customers how that particular restaurant did on its inspection.

AB 626 also exempts home kitchens from certain requirements that restaurants must follow, such as using commercial grade equipment. Meneghetti says that is reasonable for home kitchens, but what is unreasonable is an exemption of having a designated hand-washing station other than the home's bathroom sink.

"Our hands are really tied in a lot of areas for requiring things that we feel are important to being protective of the public health and the prevent food-borne illnesses," she said. "The bill specifically states that we cannot

require any additional food safety requirements other than what's written in the law."

But for O'Leary, AB 626 would open many opportunities for those—including stay-at-home parents and new immigrants—who don't have the money to start a brick-and-mortar restaurant.

"It's about \$250,000 to start a restaurant in California on average," he said. "Some of the folks we've been hearing from are new immigrants to this country, who have plenty of amazing ideas for delicious food and want to share their gifts with the community, and have no opportunity."

Riverside County supervisors approved AB 626 on May 7 with a 4-0 vote and will start dishing out permits in June.

"Food is really one of the most primal connectors of people throughout all human history. It's one of the key factors of community building," O'Leary said. "In our society, something like this home restaurant bill is essential for repairing the social fabric in a pretty major way. This really can change our society for the better." □

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