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DOI ARRESTS 6 RESTAURANT OPERATORS IN BRIBERY "STING"
- Paid Undercover Agents \$690 To Ignore Health Code Violations In Queens, The Bronx, & Brooklyn -

ROSE GILL HEARN, Commissioner of the Department of Investigation (DOI), announced yesterday's felony and misdemeanor arrests of six restaurant operators in Queens, Bronx and Brooklyn for paying bribes, ranging from \$40 to \$300, to DOI undercover agents who posed as City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) inspectors. The payoffs were allegedly given to avoid summonses for Health Code violations such as mouse droppings and uncovered food. In one case, the money was an illegal gratuity.

"New Yorkers should take comfort in the fact that the City works hard to make sure its citizens eat in clean, healthy restaurants," said Commissioner Gill Hearn. "I commend the inspectors who refused the payoffs from these defendants and, additionally, reported these bribes and gratuities to DOI. The honesty and integrity of these inspectors reflects the overwhelming majority of decent and hardworking City employees."

The facts and circumstances leading to these arrests are summarized below:

Following notification by DOHMH inspectors that the owners or managers of five restaurants allegedly offered them bribes, DOI conducted an investigation in which undercover investigators, posing as Health inspectors, visited those establishments.

1). A DOI undercover went to Vito's Pizzeria, located at 78-37 Springfield Boulevard in Queens, and met Vito Spina, who said he was the owner. After the undercover pointed out violations that included a pool of blood in the refrigerator and mouse droppings on the floor, Spina offered and paid the undercover \$40 to overlook the violations.

2). At El Estadio restaurant, located at 43-24 91st Place, in Elmhurst, Queens, a DOI undercover met Alba Chaverra, who said she was the owner. After the undercover pointed out several violations, including uncovered food and a garbage receptacle in the food area, Chaverra offered and gave the undercover \$50 and said "this is for coffee."

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3) A undercover DOI investigator inspecting Burger Barn restaurant, at 3092 White Plains Road, The Bronx, met Ilias Georgopoulos, who said he was the owner. After the undercover pointed out several violations, including uncovered meat, Georgopoulos offered and paid the undercover \$100 to overlook the violations.

4) While visiting Maya Restaurant at 1810 Cedar Avenue, The Bronx, a DOI undercover met Yu Le Weng, who said he was the owner. After the undercover pointed out several violations, including a large bowl of uncooked, unpeeled, shrimp with a steel scrub pad resting on top of them in a sink, as well as uncovered containers of uncooked food, Weng offered and paid the undercover \$300.

5) An undercover DOI investigator visiting Paphos Diner at 2586 Fulton Street, Brooklyn met Christos Ioannou, who called himself "Chris" and identified himself as the owner, as well as Iacovos Xenofontos, who called himself "Jack," and said he held the Food Protection Certificate. (City law requires that during business hours all restaurants must have an employee present who has attended a 15-hour DOHMH class on safe handling, preparation and storage of food. Graduates of these classes are given Food Protection Certificates.) After the undercover pointed out several violations, including crates of eggs and vegetables resting on top of a pool of blood, and dented tomato cans in the pantry area, both "Chris" and "Jack" stated that they would "make it easy" for the undercover to overlook the violations, and offered and paid him \$200.

The defendants Vito Spina, Ilias Georgopoulos, Yu Le Weng, Christos Ioannou, and Iacovos Xenofontos, were each charged with Bribery in the Third Degree, a Class D felony. If convicted, each faces up to 7 years in prison. Alba Chaverra is charged with Giving Unlawful Gratuities, an A misdemeanor, and faces a maximum of one year in jail.

The investigations were conducted by Sam Amorese, DOI's Inspector General for DOHMH, Deputy Inspector General Stephan Zander, Assistant Inspector General Bradley Howard, and Confidential Investigator Byron Biggerstaff.

The defendants Spina and Chaverra will be prosecuted by Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown's Integrity Bureau, with Assistant District Attorney Dan O'Leary handling the cases. Defendants Georgopoulos and Weng will be prosecuted by The Bronx District Attorney Robert T. Johnson's Economic Crime Bureau, with Assistant District Attorney Jose A. Arocho handling the cases. Defendants Ioannou and Xenofontos will be prosecuted by Kings County District Attorney Charles J. Hynes' Rackets Bureau, with Assistant District Attorney Peter L. Zanolin handling the cases.

Get the worms out of the Big Apple.

To make complaints about someone ripping off the City, call 311 or DOI directly at (212) 825-5959.