

Chipotle CEO Discusses Multiple Health Scares

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Description

In the midst of the second illness outbreak linked to Chipotle in two months, founder and CEO Steve Ells apologizes to those who have been sickened and promises strict new guidelines to protect patrons from any future health issues.

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CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

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Transcript

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MATT LAUER, anchor:

Steve Ells, Chipotle's founder and co-CEO is with us now exclusively. Mister Ells, good morning. Good to have you here.

STEVE ELLS (Founder and CEO of Chipotle): Matt, good morning.

LAUER: I was watching the tape, I was watching your face watching the tape as well. This is a hard time for you guys.

ELLS: It's a really tough time. But first, I have to say I'm sorry for the people who got sick. They're having a tough time and-- and I feel terrible about that. And we're doing a lot to rectify this and to make sure this doesn't happen again.

LAUER: Let-- let's start in Boston, we'll work our way back to the Pacific Northwest.

ELLS: Yes.

LAUER: The norovirus is what sickened these people, 120 it seems up in Boston. The restaurant is closed down. They've been issued some violations. The cleanup is underway. Are you convinced that you've contained this now that more people won't report being sick?

ELLS: Well, so in regard to the E. coli, you know, there was one particular period of time, from-- from mid-October until early November, that-- that appeared-- that's when the outbreak occurred and the reporting of the illnesses came out over a long period of time.

LAUER: So you're saying in Boston, you could have more cases reported?

ELLS: Well, with the norovirus, probably, you know, you've heard that this is the-- this is the extent of it but it's a-- it's a very-- it's a disease that-- that is very easily passed and so it spreads very, very quickly from-- from person to person.

LAUER: And you convinced when you reopen that store in Brighton up near Boston that-- that people will not be getting sick if they go back to eat there?

ELLS: Well-- well, when we reopen, the restaurant will be completely sanitized and-- and every single employee will have been tested and-- and assured that they do not have norovirus.

LAUER: Now let's go back to the Pacific Northwest, the E. coli outbreak their started in early November. Forty-three stores shut down, dozens of people got sick. It's my understanding that after weeks of investigating this, the FDA has not found an exact source of that E. coli bacteria, is that true?

ELLS: It's-- it's true and-- and we have-- we have had teams looking at this. We've-- we closed our restaurants out of an abundance of caution and tested all the ingredients, surfaces, thousands and thousands of tests, Matt, and they all came back negative for-- for E. coli. And so-- and so if there is a silver lining in this, it is that we have looked at every single ingredient that we use at Chipotle. We use 64 ingredients that we bring in, so from farm through the distribution network, how we prepare the food, how we cook the food and how we serve the food. We've had a team of epidemiologists and food safety experts to-- to raise our standards from-- from-- from the already industry norms that-- that-- that are--

LAUER: But you call it a silver lining and I-- I think it might be troubling because if you can't identify the source, how do you go about eliminating it in the future?

ELLS: Well, unfortunately, what got people sick was no longer in the system by the time they even showed symptoms and so-- and so, unfortunately, you'll not find that. But what-- but the silver lining comment is-- is that it has caused us to put in place practices that our epidemiologist expert Doctor (unintelligible) says will put us 10 to 15years ahead of industry norms. And-- and-- and I believe this will be the safest restaurant to eat at.

LAUER: Lot of damage has been done, Mister Ells, stock prices dropped double digits since this began in-- in early November, that's a big loss from the bottom line. Two parts to this, first of all, financially, can the company recover?

ELLS: Well, certainly, but that's not what we're thinking about now. We're thinking about the safety and-- and-- and quality of our ingredients. To put in place practices that will not enable this to happen again. Practices that are so far above industry norms today, we will be the safest place to eat. And that is our commitment. Much like food with integrity to bring the very best ingredients to-- to fast food, we're now saying we have practices that will make it the safest place to eat.

LAUER: And finally real quickly if you can, there are critics who say, Mister Ells, that this company started with a great idea and then grew too fast. That it just took off at a-- at a rate where you couldn't keep control of things like sourcing and quality control and even things that would affect the public health. Is there some merit to that claim?

ELLS: I don't think so because if you-- if you look at the quality of our ingredients over time, we've made great strides in sourcing better quality food, meats without antibiotics or growth hormones, more organics, more local and sustainably raised foods. This was a very unfortunate incident, and I'm deeply sorry this happened. But-- but the procedures we're putting in place today are so above industry norms, that-- that we are going to be the safest place to eat.

LAUER: Steve Ells, it's good of you to join us this morning.

ELLS: Matt, thank you.

LAUER: I know you've got an awful lot going on. Thank you very much.

ELLS: Thank you.