

Cruise Ship Compliance — How PlatePrep Helps Ships Pass USPH/VSP Inspections

The Regulatory Landscape

The U.S. Public Health Service (USPH), acting through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), runs the **Vessel Sanitation Program (VSP)** — a cooperative activity with the cruise industry that has existed since the 1970s to prevent gastrointestinal illness from spreading to U.S. ports ([CDC VSP 2018 Operations Manual](#)). VSP operates under the authority of the Public Health Service Act (42 U.S.C. § 264), and its jurisdiction covers **any ship carrying 13 or more passengers on an itinerary that includes both a foreign port and a U.S. port** ([CDC, "How We Help Prevent and Control Illness"](#); [Federal Register, 2018](#)). This means both foreign-flagged ships (the vast majority of the global cruise fleet) and U.S.-flagged vessels calling on international ports fall under VSP — river boats and Great Lakes ships that never leave U.S./Canadian waters can fall outside VSP's foreign-itinerary trigger but are still subject to state/local health codes and the FDA Food Code.

Ships under VSP jurisdiction are subject to **unannounced inspections twice a year**, conducted while the ship is in a U.S. port, covering eight major areas: medical center/illness surveillance, drinking water, galleys and dining rooms, pools/whirlpools, housekeeping, pest management, child activity centers, and HVAC ([CDC, "VSP Inspects Eight Areas"](#)). Ships are scored on a **100-point scale**, with points deducted based on the public-health significance of each violation found; **a score of 85 or below is a failing grade**, and all inspection scores — along with the ship's Corrective Action Statement — are published on the VSP website ([CDC VSP Inspections overview, archived](#)). The live, continuously updated public scorecard (the "Green Sheet Report") lists the most recent score for every ship in VSP's jurisdiction and is the exact document a prospective cruise client's F&B leadership is graded on in public view ([CDC VSP Green Sheet Report](#)).

The **2018 VSP Operations Manual** is the governing rulebook — the "bible" referenced by nearly every shipboard job description in the industry, alongside VSP's companion Construction Guidelines ([CDC, 2018 VSP Operations Manual, Federal Register notice](#)). Crucially, VSP jurisdiction reaches ships even while they are sailing outside U.S. waters: "there could be occasions when a ship violates the VSP Operations Manual while sailing outside of the United States and this violation has a potential to impact a U.S. port," so inspectors review both current and historical practices ([VSP 2018 Operations Manual, Section 2.2 Jurisdiction](#)). Foreign-flagged ships participate voluntarily but almost universally comply because U.S. port calls are commercially essential; U.S.-flagged vessels are also subject to Coast Guard and state/local health authority oversight layered on top of any applicable VSP rules.

Top 5 Compliance Areas Where Kitchens Get Cited

1. Time/Temperature Documentation — VSP requires food to be held, cooled, and reheated at documented safe temperatures, with logs proving cold/hot holding compliance ([CDC, VSP Inspects Eight Areas — Galleys and Dining Rooms](#)). Common failure: paper temperature logs get skipped or backfilled during peak dinner service when the galley is understaffed and moving fast. PlatePrep's **Prep Management** module could digitize this with mobile temp logging tied to specific prep and holding stations — currently a feature gap to build, but a natural extension of existing prep-task tracking.

2. Recipe Standardization + Allergen Documentation — VSP and the FDA Food Code both expect food service operations to have documented, standardized recipes with clear allergen callouts so cooks and service staff can answer guest allergy questions accurately ([CDC, Galleys and Dining Rooms inspection criteria](#)). Ships fail when recipes exist only in a chef's head or in inconsistent shipboard binders that vary vessel-to-vessel. PlatePrep's **Recipe IP** is a direct fit — standardized, versioned, and exportable recipes with built-in allergen fields give inspectors and corporate culinary teams one source of truth across an entire fleet.

3. HACCP Plan Documentation — Every cruise ship needs a documented Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) plan identifying critical control points across receiving, storage, prep, and service ([VSP 2018 Operations Manual](#)); job postings for shipboard executive chefs explicitly list HACCP compliance as a core duty ([Regent Seven Seas Executive Chef job posting](#)).

Recipe IP + PlateCost together provide the ingredient-level traceability (what's in a dish, where it came from, at what cost) that underpins a defensible HACCP plan, though full CCP-by-CCP workflow tracking is still a build-out.

4. Employee Health Screening + Training Records — Crew must be trained on food safety, illness reporting, and hand hygiene, and medical/illness logs (commonly referred to industry-wide as gastrointestinal illness or "GI" logs) are directly reviewed by VSP inspectors, who also interview crew to confirm no one is working while symptomatic ([CDC, VSP Inspects Eight Areas — Medical Center](#)). Ships get cited when training records are incomplete or crew can't demonstrate knowledge of illness-reporting procedures during interviews. PlatePrep's **Training Videos** and **Task Communication** modules support ongoing, trackable food-safety training and give a documented record that specific crew completed specific training — evidence inspectors specifically probe for.

5. Menu Change Documentation — Any menu change (seasonal swap, port-driven substitution, guest dietary accommodation) needs to be reviewed for allergen and food-safety impact before it reaches a plate. Undocumented, ad hoc menu changes — common when ships adjust for local ingredient availability — are a recurring soft spot. **Chef AI + Recipe IP** together create a running audit trail of every menu iteration, who approved it, and what changed, turning what's often an informal chef decision into a documented, defensible record.

PlatePrep's Positioning Angle for Cruise

- We're not pitching — we're learning what USPH/VSP compliance actually costs your F&B team in time, stress, and rework each month, and where the paperwork burden falls hardest (recipe documentation, temp logs, training records, or all three).
- We want to understand how a shipboard Executive Chef and shoreside Corporate Chef currently stay in sync on recipes and standards across a fleet — is it binders, spreadsheets, shared drives, or something more ad hoc?
- We're curious whether VSP prep — the weeks before an unannounced inspection — creates a predictable scramble, and if so, what that scramble actually looks like day-to-day.

Product Gaps to Build for This Vertical

- **Mobile temperature logging** tied to specific holding/prep stations, with time-stamped, exportable logs for VSP review.

- **HACCP critical-control-point (CCP) tracking** — structured workflow beyond recipe/cost data, mapping each CCP to a corrective action and sign-off.
- **VSP inspection-prep checklists** mirroring the eight official inspection areas, so F&B leadership can self-audit before an unannounced visit.
- **Foreign-flag / non-USPH international regulatory support** — EU, UK MCA, and flag-state (Bahamas, Malta, etc.) food-safety frameworks differ from VSP and would need their own compliance templates for foreign-flagged fleets.
- **Illness/GI-log integration** connecting medical center reporting to galley crew scheduling (so a symptomatic crew member is automatically flagged out of food handling).
- **Multi-vessel / fleet rollup reporting** so a corporate culinary director can see recipe compliance, training completion, and prep documentation status across every ship at once.

Discovery Questions Chad Should Ask

1. What's your VSP (or flag-state equivalent) inspection score been across your last two or three inspections?
2. Walk me through how you currently document holding and cooling temperatures during service — paper logs, spreadsheets, something else?
3. Who owns recipe standardization across your fleet — is there one master recipe library, or does each ship/chef maintain their own?
4. How do you currently document and approve menu changes, especially allergen-related ones?
5. What does the week before a scheduled or surprise VSP inspection actually look like for your galley team?
6. How do you track food-safety and hygiene training completion for new crew — is it centralized or ship-by-ship?
7. When a ship gets cited, what's the process for building and submitting the Corrective Action Statement?
8. How much of your Executive Chef's or F&B Director's time each month goes to compliance paperwork versus actual menu/culinary work?
9. Do you have a single corporate culinary or F&B leader who sets standards across the whole fleet, or is it more decentralized ship-by-ship?
10. If you could wave a wand and fix one recurring compliance headache, what would it be?

Sources: [CDC Vessel Sanitation Program — About](#); [CDC — VSP Inspects Eight Areas](#); [CDC VSP 2018 Operations Manual](#); [CDC VSP Green Sheet Report \(live scores\)](#); [Federal Register, Availability of VSP Operations Manual and Construction Guidelines, 2018](#); [VSP 2018 Operations Manual §2.2 Jurisdiction](#).