

Halal Food – the challenge of making an informed choice

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When it comes to making food choices, effort is always made to go for the best based on an informed decision. This article is a humble effort to enhance consumer awareness on Halal Certification process so that they are aware of the difference between self-proclaimed halal and certified halal.

Certification plays a decisive role in buying choices as it inspires consumer's trust and confidence because of the transparency and verifiability of the process. There are different halal standards that are a prerequisite of access for clients and manufacturers who want to trade in a specific country to meet its demand and grasp the market. A product certified by a competent and well-established halal certification body is accepted globally without any need for further investigation or verification.

Product approval is a very sensitive process that requires focused and in-depth analysis which is only possible under a competent and experienced technical team. Halal certification bodies have a well-structured and highly organized system for product approval which is the first step towards halal certification. Product submissions as well as supporting documents are reviewed and scrutinized by highly qualified, trained and experienced food technologists. Halal certification is the basis for making and maintaining a halal claim (BRC Issue 08, clause 5.4.5, Page 44).

In this lieu, self-proclaimed halal food is not only a challenge for food industry but a big threat for consumers believes too as it comes without any authenticity or verifiability. One may find a number of some self-proclaimed halal products simply bearing an inscription of Arabic word that neither stands for any halal certification body nor represents any traceability or any authenticable process of ensuring halal standards. On the other, halal certification bodies put more financial and human sources to ensure product authenticity, which is almost impossible in the case of self-proclaimed products. They have designed a detailed process of reviewing and approving product documents, verifying production/ manufacturing sites through audits and supervisions to evaluate the halal control point (HCP) and ensure that product and manufacturing processes fulfill the requirements of halal standards.

The halal products approved by Halal certification bodies depict specific logos/ symbols which are identifiable and traceable. These bodies ensure halal authenticity from farm to fork and keep records from raw materials to finished products. Throughout the process, due consideration is given to ensure that product labeling does not create any confusion in the Muslim community. For example, white wine vinegar can be halal (if the process of making the vinegar is not from the alcoholic beverage). However, the labeling of such products can be misleading and misinterpreted amongst the consumers.

The halal certification body ensure that the sources of the ingredients of such products and its labeling are according to the Islamic set rules and keep the record for traceability purposes. Labels are scrutinized and approved by the Islamic/ sharia experts before releasing the product to the market. Though, the depiction of a halal certification logo does not require the use of bilingual or multilingual labels, but the labeling artwork in different languages ascertain that the correct message is conveyed to the end consumer about the products in every possible manner and help consumers understand the label in a better way. Hidden ingredients such as processing aids, anti-caking agents, carriers, and incidental/ cross contaminated ingredients from various sources present another serious problem for Muslim consumers. For example, Magnesium or Calcium stearates are used in the manufacturing of candy and chewing gum, which can be sourced from lard, tallow and beef fat (halal, non-halal and haram source). Without mentioning the origin of these stearates which derived from the animal fat could be doubtful. The animal source ingredients such as oils, fats, meat derivatives, or extracts like gelatin and rennet also need to be declared. Halal certification of the product, with halal markings, and logos can clarify the doubt for consumers as it requires clear labeling of the source of the ingredients like gelatin, lecithin, mono & diglycerides, etc. A product with the halal-certified logo makes life easier for consumers to make prudent choices while purchasing products from market. Food safety management systems implement and monitor a number of critical control points (CCP) to make sure that the food safety is not compromised at any stage from production to presentation. Similarly, halal assurance management system also implements and monitors halal control points (HCPs) to eliminate the risk of cross-contamination from non-halal materials during the manufacturing process and it remains a key aspect of the halal certification process as well. HCPs are verified through a halal audit which is conducted by independent highly qualified, trained and experienced auditors. This exercise is done on annual basis at least and is followed by unannounced surveillance audits. Thus, the halal-certified products must fulfill this criterion before being released to the market.

Halal-certified foods are monitored and certified from farm to fork. The food supply chain and its related equipment are regularly examined, verified and validated through halal audits and supervisions. This exercise is conducted to eliminate any risk of Haram (non-halal) food contamination. For high-risk sites, the risk of contamination of halal critical materials are verified and validated through ISO17025 accredited labs, to eliminate and minimize the cross contamination of the non-halal ingredients. The records are maintained, reviewed and verified by technical auditors during the site audit.

Cleaning and verification of the equipment as well as the environment also form an important part of the certification process. Deep cleaning, validation and verification using environmental swabbing and specie identification techniques (third-party ISO 17025- certified labs) are the part of the halal certification approval process.

Demand of halal-certified food is gaining momentum with every passing day as the enhanced community awareness of certification and its significance is resulting into an increased mandate for halal-certified products. However, the need for awareness and education on vital aspects of halal-certified food still remains high.

Summing it up, one can safely say that simply labeling a product does not make it halal. Under any circumstances, the claim must be supported by some verifiable facts and Halal Certification by an authorized body is the best answer to all the questions that may come to a consumer's mind before making a prudent choice.

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