

What is Halal Certified Food?

'Halal food,' 'Halal ingredients,' 'Halal certified restaurants;' the term 'halal' is commonly used in day to day contexts. The term itself has caused much controversy, even in Sri Lanka, mostly because of a lack of proper understanding.

The term 'halal' is an Arabic word meaning 'things or actions, lawful, permitted or allowable in Islam'. In terms of food production this covers a wide scope, which includes the entire production of a food item, from the raw materials used to the processing, packaging and delivering.

Throughout the years, global acceptance of halal certified products and the demand for halal food has seen phenomenal rise. This is mainly because halal certification has (i) afforded the Halal conscious consumers the comfort that the product has met the Halal quality standards and (ii) made food producers realise that it is a practical and genuine way to attract local and international halal conscious consumers.

Alcoholic beverages

A halal certification ensures that 'haram' materials are not used in the entire production and supply chain of the product certified as Halal. These 'haram' materials – materials prohibited and not allowed in Islam – include pig and all its by-products, alcoholic drinks and other intoxicants, carrion (dead animals) or animals improperly slaughtered, blood and blood by-products, human body parts, reptiles, rodents and insects, hazardous and poisonous substances, carnivorous animals and birds of prey, amongst other things.

Swine and its by-products, used mainly as meat and in the production of gelatine, are also used in the production of soap, cosmetics, glycerine, and certain medicines. Carrion or carcass of dead animals is used to manufacture collagen, used in the production of sausage casings, and gelatine used in yoghurt, jelly etc. Alcoholic beverages are used in food preparation such as cake, ice cream and chocolates.

L-Cysteine obtained from human hair and bird feathers are used as a food additive in the baking industry and preparation of savoury flavour. Insects such as Cochineal (Carminic Acid -E120) are used to produce natural food colouring.

The examples referred to above clearly show how these non-halal materials get into various products, which will render the product not halal for the halal conscious consumer. The normal packaging material of products will not display such details for easy recognition of halal conscious consumers.

Processing aids

To determine halal status, halal certificate holders must ensure that prohibited raw materials are not used in any of the processing methods and technologies used by them. Some of the processing methods are: usage of enzymes (in cheese processing), gelatine as clarifying agent (in clear fruit juice production) and activated carbon in the purification process (used carbon in edible oil production).

Further, they must also ensure that the processing aids used do not contain any haram substances. Processing aids are hidden ingredients used during production such as, releasing agents, lubricants, filtering agents, anti-foaming agents, firming agents, de-colorizing agent etc. These substances are not disclosed in the ingredients list of products and therefore, consumers would have no knowledge of what substances are used. As such as there will be contamination of non-halal with halal rendering the final product as non-halal.

The other two very important aspects of Halal certification are prevalence of cleanliness and prevention of cross contamination. A halal certified processing plant is required to maintain high standards of hygienic practices namely sanitation and cleanliness. For example, all workers involved in the production process are required to maintain cleanliness of hands, nails, prevent hair from falling into food etc.

Halal certified facilities must ensure they practise good storage and food preparation practices. Any raw material or ingredients that expired its shelf life shall not be used in any stage of the processing. Thus, Halal certification provides consumers the comfort and assurance that the final product is both devoid of any non-halal materials and any cross-contamination.

The process of obtaining a halal certificate is no easy task, as the applicant for Halal certification shall be extensively assessed to make certain they have the commitment and ability to meet all halal standards before deciding to approve the applicant for awarding Halal certificate for their products.

Halal for all

After being awarded the Halal certificate, the certificate holder will be subject to several surveillance audits to ensure continuous compliance of halal standards and for reinforcing assurance of halal integrity. The referred to surveillance audits shall be both announced and unannounced periodic audits.

The Halal certificate is usually valid for one year and has to be renewed on or before the expiry date.

There prevails some misunderstanding in that halal food is only for Muslims. On the contrary these are only food permissible to be consumed by Muslims and not special products reserved for Muslims. Another misconception is that halal food items are devoted to God/s. Halal food is meant for human consumption and is not left at any altar as an offering to God.

Some say that halal certification is an attempt to divide society. In fact, the certification attempts to facilitate the right of all people to exercise their free will in purchasing the product of their choice. Besides, it gives even non-Muslim owned food processing units and food outlets the ability and opportunity to serve the needs of Muslim consumers.

Halal Accreditation Council (Guarantee) Ltd., (HAC) is a duly registered, not for profit organisation conducting Halal certification under the able stewardship of eminent professionals and business persons of Sri Lanka and further guided by well-reputed erudite theologians. HAC is ISO 9000-2015 certified by Sri Lanka Standards Institution as having a reliable quality management system. HAC certificates are recognised and accepted by most of the reputed Halal certification bodies in the world as it holds membership in the World Halal Food Council. Hence, HAC humbly takes pride of its unblemished credentials.

In conclusion, it can be rightly said that HAC Halal certification is a worthy value addition to a halal product.

(This article is submitted by the Halal Accreditation Council in Sri Lanka)