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Feature Article

Rotten at the Core: The Growing Problem of Spoiled Produce in Fiji's Supermarkets

It was an ordinary shopping trip for Mere, a Suva resident, until she reached into a neatly stacked pile of potatoes at a prominent supermarket and felt her fingers sink into soft, foul-smelling rot. The potato, deceptively vibrant on the outside, was spoiled beneath the surface. Mere's experience isn't an isolated incident—it reflects a troubling trend across Fiji, where consumers are increasingly confronted with substandard, sometimes hazardous, fresh produce lining supermarket shelves. From bruised fruits to moldy vegetables, the issue of rotten produce is not just an inconvenience; it's a public health concern that undermines consumer confidence and highlights gaps in food quality management.

While Fiji's retailers boast modern facilities and supply chains, the presence of spoiled produce reveals systemic issues that stretch beyond the aisles. It is a problem that affects both large retail chains and small-time market operators, raising critical questions about food handling practices, regulatory enforcement, and accountability. This article delves into the root causes of this growing concern, the impacts on Fijian consumers, and what can be done to ensure that fresh really means fresh.

The Scope of the Problem

The issue of spoiled produce is not just anecdotal—it's statistically significant. A staggering 399 complaints related to food and drink were lodged between January and December 2024 with the Consumer Council of Fiji. This figure isn't just a number; it represents the highest category of complaints across all consumer sectors, underscoring the severity and widespread nature of the problem.

These complaints paint a grim picture of the realities faced by Fijian shoppers. Reports range from visibly moldy fruits and vegetables to packaged goods well past their expiration dates, often sold without any price reductions or warnings. Supermarkets, which many assume adhere to stricter quality control measures, are frequently cited in these grievances. However, small-time operators, including roadside vendors and municipal market sellers, are not exempt from scrutiny. Inconsistent storage conditions, poor handling practices, and the absence of rigorous oversight contribute to the problem, creating a perfect storm where rotten produce regularly finds its way into shopping baskets.

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Consumer Council of Fiji



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National Taskforce on Food Safety

For many years, the Council has repeatedly called for stronger regulations to ensure that supermarkets are held accountable for the quality of their goods. In 2024, a new taskforce was formed to look into, and address the issues around food safety in Fiji, headed by the Ministry of Trade, Cooperatives SME's and Communications. The taskforce brought together stakeholders such as the Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Health, Agriculture, and organizations such as the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji, the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission and the Consumer Council, among others. This year, recognizing the need for increased collaboration, the members of the National Food Safety Taskforce have signed an important Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which ensures collaboration to improve the handling, storage, and sale of fresh produce in retail settings across the country.

Real-Life Impact on Consumers

One consumer, a resident of Suva, shared her experience of purchasing a pack of onions from a well-known supermarket, which had already been packed for selling. "The onions looked fresh when I picked them up, but when I got home, I found that several were already moldy after peeling," she recalled. "I felt disappointed because I had paid full price for a product that was not fit for consumption." She attempted to contact the store for a refund or exchange but received no satisfactory resolution, which left her even more frustrated.

In another instance, a family from Lautoka bought a bundle of bananas that seemed fine at first glance. However, upon peeling them at home, they discovered that the bananas had turned black inside, rendering them inedible. The family reached out to the supermarket, but like many other consumers, they were given no compensation or apology. These experiences reflect a broader trend where rotten or damaged goods are being sold without any care taken to indicate their deteriorated state.

This problem extends beyond individual complaints. In some cases, supermarkets have been observed displaying overripe produce directly next to fresh produce, making it easy for consumers to unwittingly purchase substandard items. Such practices not only frustrate consumers but also contribute to food waste, as many of these items are discarded shortly after purchase.

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The issue of spoiled produce in Fiji's supermarkets stems from a complex interplay of factors rather than a single point of failure. The persistence of this problem suggests that even with existing systems in place, more proactive and adaptive measures are required from retailers to consistently maintain the freshness of their produce. Addressing this issue demands a coordinated effort that involves all stakeholders of this sector.

What Can Consumers Do?

Consumers play a vital role in ensuring that supermarkets adhere to the standards and maintain the quality of fresh produce. While regulatory bodies and retailers have their responsibilities, consumers can also be powerful agents of change through their purchasing habits, vigilance, and advocacy. Here are a few proactive steps that Fijians can take:

1. **Inspect Produce Thoroughly:** Always examine the condition of fresh produce before purchasing. Look for signs of spoilage such as discoloration, bruising, mold, or an unusual odor. Gently check the firmness of fruits and vegetables without causing damage, and opt for items that appear fresh and well-preserved. Choose supermarkets that respect your right to quality products and boycott that knowingly sell poor-quality goods.
2. **Report Substandard Goods:** If you encounter rotten or spoiled produce, do not hesitate to report it. Raise the issue directly with the supermarket's customer service team to prompt immediate action. Additionally, file a formal complaint with the Consumer Council of Fiji to ensure that the matter is documented and investigated, potentially leading to systemic changes.
3. **Understand Your Rights:** Familiarize yourself with your consumer rights under Fijian law. Knowing what standards retailers are obligated to meet empowers you to demand better quality and service. The Consumer Council of Fiji offers resources and guidance to help consumers understand their rights regarding food safety and quality.
4. **Encourage Accountability through boycotts:** Advocate for greater transparency and accountability from supermarkets and boycott retailers who regularly ignore consumer health and safety. Public pressure can be a powerful tool in driving retailers to prioritize freshness and safety.

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5. **Promote Ethical Purchasing:** Choose to support retailers and vendors who consistently maintain high standards for their fresh produce. Reward good practices with your business, and spread the word within your community about stores that prioritize food safety and quality. This consumer-driven demand can incentivize others to improve their practices.
6. **Raise Awareness:** Use social media platforms to share your experiences with substandard produce. Publicly highlighting issues can create broader awareness, encouraging other consumers to be vigilant and holding retailers publicly accountable for poor practices.

Conclusion

The sale of rotten produce in supermarkets is a serious issue that affects both consumer health and finances. While the recent MOU signed between the key stakeholders is a step in the right direction, ongoing vigilance from Consumers is necessary to ensure that supermarkets adhere to higher standards of quality control. By staying informed and actively participating in the protection of consumer rights, Fijians can help drive the change needed to create a fairer and safer marketplace for all.

Report any such incidents to the Council via our National Toll-free line 155. We can't be everywhere, which is why we need your support in reporting these unethical practices.

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