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FEATURE ARTICLE

What Our Restaurant Surveillance Reveals? Consumers 'Role in Dining Out'

With the festive season in full swing, restaurants, cafés, bakeries, and takeaways across the nation are buzzing with activity. It's one of the busiest food-service periods of the year, with families gathering for dinners, friends reconnecting over coffee, office parties in full swing, weekend treats being enjoyed, and holiday travellers filling tables. For many households, holiday dining is a tradition that marks the end of a long year and the beginning of festive cheer.

Behind this excitement, the Consumer Council's recent nationwide surveillance of food establishments has brought to light a number of worrying issues. While many restaurants are compliant and committed to maintaining safe and hygienic practices, a portion of food establishments are falling short, in some cases, dangerously so.

This feature article takes a closer look at what we found, why it matters, and how consumers can protect themselves without giving up the pleasure of dining out. We are not asking you to stop eating out. Instead, we want you to **eat out smarter, safer, and more confidently**, especially during a season when the demand for restaurant meals rapidly increases.

What We Found: A Closer Look at Restaurant Hygiene in Fiji

In recent weeks, the Council conducted **220 inspections** across restaurants, cafés, bakeries, snack bars, and takeaways nationwide. The results revealed a mix: while many establishments displayed good standards and responsible food-handling practices, others showed shocking lapses that pose direct risks to consumer health.

These findings don't represent every restaurant but they do highlight issues that consumers must be aware of.

1. Dirty, Unsafe, and Unhygienic Environments

Some of the kitchens inspected were operating in conditions that can only be described as filthy. Council officers noted:

- Greasy, slippery floors that had not been cleaned for hours
- Food preparation benches covered in grime, crumbs, and dried residues
- Cooking equipment coated with soot and old grease

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- Dirty aprons and towels being reused
- Overflowing rubbish bins attracting flies
- Open drains and stagnant water around cooking areas

In some cases, the dirt was so embedded that it indicated long-term poor cleaning practices.

These conditions are not simply unpleasant, they are dangerous. Bacteria thrive in dirty environments, and when food is prepared in such spaces, contamination becomes inevitable.

2. Lax and Unsafe Food-Handling Practices

Another major issue uncovered was poor food-handling. Officers observed practices such as:

- Staff touching ready-to-eat food with bare hands
- Workers handling money, mobile phones, or cleaning cloths before going back to food
- No gloves used when handling bread, pastries, salads, or cooked meats
- No hairnets or caps to prevent hair from falling into food
- Aprons that were visibly dirty or stained from previous shifts

Such habits dramatically increase the risk of spreading foodborne illnesses. A single careless action such as touching cooked food after handling raw chicken can lead to serious health consequences.

3. Cross-Contamination Risks

Cross-contamination is one of the most common causes of food poisoning. During our inspections, we found:

- Raw chicken stored next to cooked meats
- Cutting boards used for both seafood and vegetables
- Dirty utensils being rinsed briefly and reused
- Cooked food left uncovered
- Containers that were cracked, dirty, or rusted being used to store food

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When raw and cooked foods come into contact, harmful bacteria transfer quickly. When these bacteria go unnoticed, they end up in the meals served to consumers.

4. Spoiled and Rotten Ingredients Being Used

One of the most disturbing findings involved the condition of ingredients being used by some restaurants. Officers discovered:

- Rotten onions, potatoes, carrots, and leafy greens
- Poultry and meat with foul smells and signs of spoilage
- Mouldy items kept in storage
- Unrefrigerated foods left at room temperature for hours
- Freezers that were broken, dirty, overstocked, or operating at unsafe temperatures

Food spoilage doesn't only affect taste, it can lead to severe food poisoning, especially in children, elderly people, and those with weakened immunity.

5. Licensing and Expiry Date Non-Compliance

Alongside hygiene issues, numerous establishments were found breaching legal requirements. Some were operating with:

- Expired Business Registration Certificates
- Lapsed Health Licences
- Missing or out-of-date NFA Certificates
- No visible Grading Certificates
- Packaged products with missing labels
- Expired food items being displayed
- Suspicious expiry dates that appeared altered

Such practices reflect a disregard for consumer welfare and for the rules governing food safety.

Why These Findings Matter; Especially During the Festive Season

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December and January are months when thousands of people dine out more frequently. From Christmas picnics to year-end office lunches, from weekend brunches to New Year's Eve dinners, eateries experience some of their highest traffic.

This increased demand often means:

- staff working faster
- kitchens operating under pressure
- faster food turnover
- shortcuts being taken
- hygiene habits slipping

If a restaurant is already operating with poor standards, the festive rush makes it even more likely that mistakes will occur. That is why consumers must remain alert. You do not need to stop eating out but you do need to be more watchful. Your health and your family's safety depend on it.

A Consumer's Guide: How to Identify a Clean and Safe Eatery

You don't need special training to spot poor hygiene. Here are simple, practical checks you can do in less than a minute.

1. Look at the Staff

Before ordering, quickly observe the people preparing your food:

- Are they wearing gloves when handling ready-to-eat items?
- Are they using tongs instead of touching food directly?
- Do they have hairnets or caps?
- Do they move between tasks without washing hands?

If you see staff touching cooked food after handling cash or dirty surfaces, that is a bad sign.

You have the right to ask them to use gloves or proper utensils.

2. Check the Cleanliness of the Surroundings

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A restaurant that cares about hygiene keeps both the dining area and kitchen clean. Look for:

- dirty floors
- sticky tables
- overflowing bins
- food scraps on counters
- utensils that look poorly washed

If the front area is dirty, imagine what the kitchen might look like.

3. Look Around for Pests

Cockroaches, flies, ants, cats or dogs near food are alarming signs. If you spot these, it's best to leave immediately.

4. Observe Food Storage

If food is displayed:

- Is it covered?
- Is it stored behind glass?
- Are the fridges properly sealed and clean?
- Are bakery items openly exposed to flies?

Poor storage is a major source of contamination.

5. Trust Your Senses

If something smells off, looks discoloured, or tastes strange, don't ignore it.

Council's Advice for Consumers This Festive Season

As celebrations begin, here is our guidance to help you enjoy meals safely:

- **Be observant** when choosing where to dine.
- **Look for cleanliness** in both staff and environment.
- **Speak up** if you notice unsafe practices.

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- Choose establishments that maintain high standards.
- Avoid places that show visible signs of poor hygiene.
- Report serious concerns to National Consumer Helpline 155.

The goal is not to scare consumers, but to empower them. Clean, safe food should be the norm, not a luxury.

Creating a Safer Food Industry Together

The Council continues to work closely with municipal councils, the Ministry of Health, and relevant enforcement bodies to ensure that non-compliant restaurants face the appropriate actions. However, real change is a shared responsibility. You, as consumers, play a vital role through your vigilance and choices. When people choose clean eateries, question unsafe practices, and refuse to tolerate unacceptable standards, businesses are forced to improve. This festive season, enjoy your favourite restaurants, cafés, and bakeries, but do so with awareness. Your health is your responsibility, and your choices help shape a safer, cleaner hospitality industry for everyone.

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