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FEATURE ARTICLE

Transparency in Food Preparation: Why Disclosure Matters to Consumers

For many consumers in Fiji, food choices are closely tied to religious beliefs, cultural practices, ethical values, and personal health considerations. As Fiji's food service industry continues to expand and diversify, recent developments have brought renewed attention to the importance of transparency in food preparation practices and the responsibility of food businesses to clearly inform consumers about how their food is prepared.

This feature article serves as a general consumer advisory, reminding both food operators and consumers that clear disclosure is essential to informed choice, trust, and respect in a multicultural society.

Food Choices and Cultural Sensitivity in Fiji

Fiji is home to a richly diverse population, made up of people from different religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. Dietary practices vary widely across communities. Some consumers avoid certain meats such as beef or pork for religious reasons, others follow vegetarian or vegan diets, while many are guided by health conditions, allergies, or personal ethical beliefs.

In such a context, food preparation practices matter just as much as the ingredients themselves. The way food is cooked, the equipment used, and whether cooking oils or utensils are shared between different food items can determine whether a meal is suitable for a particular consumer. For example, even if a menu item does not contain meat, it may still be unsuitable for some consumers if it is prepared using shared oil or equipment that has been used to cook meat products.

These concerns were recently brought to the forefront following a case in which a restaurant was found to be frying beef products and fries in the same cooking oil. This highlighted how, in the absence of clear disclosure, consumers may unknowingly make food choices that conflict with their religious beliefs, cultural practices, or dietary needs.

Why Transparency and Disclosure Matter

Consumers have the right to accurate, sufficient, and clear information about the goods and services they purchase. In the food sector, this right extends beyond pricing and portion sizes to include information that may influence dietary decisions, including religious, cultural, and health considerations.

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Clear disclosure benefits consumers by allowing them to make informed choices aligned with their religious, cultural, or health needs. It helps them avoid distress or disappointment after a purchase, ensures they feel respected and valued by businesses, and allows them to maintain confidence when dining out.

Transparency also benefits businesses. Open and honest disclosure builds trust and loyalty among customers, reduces complaints and disputes, and demonstrates social responsibility and cultural awareness. In an increasingly informed marketplace, transparency also plays a critical role in protecting a business's reputation.

In a society as diverse as Fiji, transparency is a sign of respect.

Industry-Wide Responsibility

Recent public discussion around food preparation practices serves as a reminder that this issue is not limited to any one outlet or brand. Similar practices may exist across the food service sector, including fast-food outlets, restaurants, cafés, bakeries, and takeaways.

Food operators are encouraged to take a proactive approach by reviewing their kitchen processes and assessing how these practices may affect different consumer groups. Where full separation of cooking equipment or oil is not feasible due to space or cost limitations, disclosure becomes even more important.

Simple and effective disclosure methods include:

- Clear signage at counters or ordering points;
- Notes on menus indicating shared cooking practices;
- Verbal explanations by trained staff when customers ask questions; and
- Consistent information across all outlets of the same business.

The Role of Staff Training

Staff play a critical role in ensuring transparency. Even when disclosures are displayed, consumers often rely on staff to clarify concerns or answer questions about food preparation.

Food businesses are encouraged to ensure that staff:

- Understand how food is prepared in their outlet;

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- Are aware of common dietary restrictions and sensitivities;
- Provide accurate and consistent information; and
- Respond respectfully to consumer inquiries.

Misinformation, whether intentional or unintentional, can lead to consumer complaints and loss of confidence.

Consumer Rights and Responsibilities

Consumers have the right to information that affects their purchasing decisions. This includes information about food preparation methods that may influence whether a product is suitable for them.

At the same time, consumers are encouraged to take an active role in protecting their interests. This includes asking questions if they are unsure about how food is prepared, reading menus and signage carefully, informing staff of any dietary restrictions or concerns before ordering, and raising concerns if information provided is unclear or misleading. Open and respectful communication helps prevent misunderstandings and promotes better outcomes for both consumers and businesses.

Complaint Resolution and Continuous Improvement

When concerns arise, it is important that they are addressed constructively.

Food businesses are encouraged to take consumer concerns seriously, review and improve internal practices where necessary, strengthen disclosure and communication, and view transparency as an ongoing commitment rather than a one-time action. From a broader perspective, continuous improvement across the industry contributes to higher standards and greater consumer confidence.

Transparency is not about restricting what businesses offer or imposing unrealistic standards; it is about ensuring that consumers are given the information they need to choose freely and confidently. By embracing openness and clear communication, food businesses can strengthen consumer trust, reduce disputes, and contribute to a fairer and more inclusive marketplace.

In the end, transparency benefits everyone; consumers, businesses, and the wider community. Consumers who require further clarification, wish to raise concerns, or need assistance regarding food preparation practices and disclosure may contact the Consumer Council of Fiji through the National Consumer Helpline on 155.

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