

Inside the Kosher Process

While the FDA and EFSA requirements for food-grade ingredients are stringent, in many ways, kosher certification provides an additional layer of scrutiny.

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Consumer safety is of the utmost importance, especially when it comes to food products. Across the globe, regulatory bodies such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) have instituted strict rules about the quality levels of food ingredients. Food manufacturers must ensure that every ingredient they use is safe to eat as defined by these local regulatory bodies. The myriad of differing regulations can be confusing; however, there are some standards that transcend regional boundaries. Kosher, for example, represents a global standard with strict requirements that help ensure the high quality that is expected in the food industry for ingredients and finished food products.

Kosher certification assures that all food ingredients (and resulting food products) labeled “kosher” meet the standards required by Jewish law. This includes stringent packaging and manufacturing requirements, which must be completely compliant for every ingredient used during the product’s manufacture. In the following article, the authors take a look at what makes a food ingredient (and resulting product) kosher, how this compares with other global standards and the (often-unexpected) level of quality kosher-certified ingredients offer.

What Makes a Food Kosher?

Kosher certification requires a review of facilities, procedures, documentation and other practices, not a religious ritual as some may believe. To be certified, the product must be made in complete conformity with the rules of Jewish dietary law, the foundation of which is laid out in the biblical books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Many of these rules relate to the suitability of animal-derived products for human consumption. The way the ingredient is sourced, handled and packaged must comply with strict kosher rules in order to receive a seal of approval. Flavor chemicals offer a good example. Since natural raw materials can often be animal- or plant-derived, they must go through an additional layer of scrutiny from a kosher certifier before they can be deemed as a kosher natural item.

Kosher vs. Standard Food Regulations

Most global regulations such as FDA or EFSA focus on facilities and critical control points, but may not place significant scrutiny on supply chain. There are some regulations such as the Food Safety Modernization Act that apply additional scrutiny to the supply chain.

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Kosher certification adds an additional layer of scrutiny to existing regulatory systems applied in food production. For example, if a facility processes both kosher and non-kosher materials, the kosher processes and equipment must be segregated from the non-kosher. In situations where segregation is not practical, strict cleaning procedures must be followed. Segregation, cleaning and supply chain review form the backbone of modern global regulations. The historical practice of kosher supervision and review includes many of the audit procedures that are now common regulatory standards. Although kosher does not guarantee a food or ingredient will meet regulatory requirements, it may provide the peace of mind that many of the requisites are already met.

Gaining Kosher Certification

The first step in gaining kosher certification for a facility and its products is to engage the services of a rabbi. That person acts as the expert and administers acceptable processes for kosher manufacture. The rabbi guides the company through all the necessary steps to kosher certification, giving advice along the way. While there may be some debate on the precise interpretation of Jewish dietary laws, there is broad consensus about the required standards.

Cleaning procedures are imperative for facilities that manufacture or handle kosher products. In fact, many facilities will house dedicated kosher production areas. In the case of shared equipment or utensils that also process non-kosher materials, all equipment must be “kosher-ized” between uses. This involves the equipment undergoing a thorough cleaning process, followed by further specific treatments such as boiling water or other forms of a heat-based process. Even the tankers and vessels used to transport bulk ingredients must be certified kosher and adhere to strict cleanliness standards.

Supply chain control for the raw materials used in products manufactured in facilities is also very important. For example, as a practical matter, animal-derived raw materials usually do not come from a kosher source and process. It is therefore

often necessary to ensure products such as glycerin, oleic acid and stearic acid do not derive from animal-based material. It must also be ensured that any fermentation-produced materials have not used growth media that contain animal-derived components such as beef extract or peptones. In other words, all raw materials must be sourced from kosher-certified suppliers that can produce kosher certificates for review by the overseeing rabbi. This process verifies that every stage of production meets kosher requirements.

After a thorough review confirming the kosher status of the facility, starting materials, finished product, packaging and transportation of the item in question, the rabbi issues the all-important kosher certificate. This verifies that a product is deemed kosher and allows the company to use a kosher-compliant seal on product labeling. The application of these seals is also controlled, with the rabbi employing a system to guarantee there is no chance of labels being mistakenly applied to non-kosher products.

The certification process does not stop there, though. Any kosher certification, especially of a facility, exposes that company to regular (and often unannounced) audits. The rabbi has full freedom to request inspection of batch records at any time.

Kosher Certifies Quality

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used for non-kosher application, so any customer can benefit from the added layer of scrutiny.

Not only does the full process of gaining kosher certification require strict compliance, it also provides the unexpected benefit of a neutral person monitoring the entire manufacturing process. Working with a rabbi means there is an additional set of eyes on the process, which can help reduce the opportunity for accidental slip-ups or substandard products or processes being overlooked.

This extra layer of oversight provides a boost to the overall quality control of all manufacturing and packaging processes within a kosher-compliant facility. This absolute control of every step in the supply chain provides significant reassurance that all of the suppliers, and the suppliers' suppliers, employ a similar level of attention to detail and control of their processes.

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