

My Own Meals, Inc.

Information about Halal Products

“**Halal**” means “proper” to consume as defined in the *Qur’an* (Muslim holy book). What constitutes proper halal certification? Halal is unique from kosher in that it is much more of an international issue than kosher is. For example, Burger King had huge halal problems after entering the West Bank. Halal certification is an established market internationally but more of a developing market in the US. Yet, it is growing in strength.

A. Commercial Marketing

Kosher and halal certification are like brand names competing in the commercial market for brand acceptance, shelf space, customer loyalty, etc. It is not personal. It is business. Success depends upon consumers’ acceptance of the reputation of the certifying organization and the qualifications of the experts working there, like the brand name on the package. This consumer reliance on reputations is similar to relying upon “experts” at the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, American Dental Association, etc. Companies all over the US clamor to obtain the endorsement of these reputable organizations to differentiate themselves from other brands. Reliance upon such reputations is like a warranty to the consumer.

B. Halal Market Background and Overview

Every religion has strict followers and those who just go along. Just as some Jews accept non-kosher foods, it is also true that some Muslims accept kosher (or even non certified) products. So, when we first entered the religious meals market, we thought we could convince the Muslims to accept kosher instead of going through the expense and effort of two separate production runs. We set-up a meeting with both religious group’s leaders to try to do this. After all, most of the kosher supervisory agencies were telling the press that kosher is acceptable to Muslims. Even the Wall Street Journal has made such reports. This is not true. Muslims are now taking an active and vocal exception to such reports, especially if any meat or meat by-product ingredients are involved.

We learned we had to both produce and market our meals separately. So important is it to both groups to keep them apart, that we set up a division of our company called J&M Food Products Company to market **J&M™** halal meat products, keeping **My Own Meal®** brand as kosher.

When we first started halal production, there were few trained and qualified Muslim inspectors. During the past 10 years or so, trained inspectors have increased in availability so the trend has changed toward more certification. Standards which were lax, are now becoming more stringent. The internet has afforded the Muslim community a bulletin board “announcement” system to reach Muslims all over the world to report companies having questionable standards. The courts have upheld the right of religious leaders to publicly state their concerns about another’s certification practices. In addition to many halal-specialty stores, some internet food stores have started-up. And in the prison system, more and more lawsuits are being won by Muslims to get halal vs. kosher foods. Hospitals are starting to buy halal in addition to kosher.

Many US food companies are in the process of establishing standards and revising formulations for future halal certification. Halal certifying agencies are getting busier and training more and more inspectors across the US. Expect the demand to grow.

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C. Business Approach

Like kosher certification, halal certification is a business. Some kosher organizations see the halal certification process as competitively “eating into their market” and are trying to more strongly promote their certification as acceptable to Muslims. For example, a former consultant to Natick Labs tried to establish his own “joint” organization where he would establish standards “acceptable” to the Muslims at a production plant. His organization would then train and “convince” his “partner” kosher supervisors to “certify” to the Muslims that these practices are followed. This was his attempt to keep the kosher certifying organizations in control of the halal consumer business area. I expressed my concerns with such a plan for both the Jewish and Muslim community before he publicly announced his plan. After “testing” it with some Muslim groups, he dropped the idea.

D. Certification Issues

We co-authored a book entitled “Halal Industrial Production Standards”. We can email you a copy if you request one. The book describes the processes for various products and discusses many of the problematic practices of prior years. Unlike kosher, there is no issue of keeping meat and milk ingredients segregated. Key issues are:

1. Meat and poultry products. Like Jews, Muslims consume meat products. They are NOT vegetarians as a group. The absence of providing meat meals would be viewed just as negatively by the Muslims as it would be with the Jews. Meat, poultry and their derivatives require specific *dhabiha halal* certification. *Dhabiha (or zhabiha) halal* means slaughtered by a follower of Islam. Various groups have differing views of what this means.

As noted, there were few trained inspectors in the past, so practices in the US were out of control. For example, our country’s poultry producers were blacklisted by Kuwait for a time (I think in the early 1990’s) for improper practices. During this time, there were Muslims who would tell companies how to slaughter and often failed to personally show up at the producer. Many would send audio tapes of prayers to the producer to play during processing - all for a fee. It was easy for the producers, so they went along with it. Unfortunately, some of these “illegal” practices continue today, making certification by a reputable outside certifying organization even more critical. And now, the Muslim community is publicly exposing such inspectors to the detriment of these producers.

Today, meat is slaughtered by trained Muslim slaughtermen under the standards, practices and inspection of a trusted Islamic organization. Poultry is usually mechanically slaughtered under the on-site supervision, control and prayers of a trained Islamic slaughterman, who will hand slaughter only those missing the mechanical knife. The theory is that the machine has no conscience and therefore cannot believe or have improper thoughts. The new trend in many international communities (particularly in Indonesia and SE Asia) is for all birds to be hand slaughtered, just like the Jews require.

Cautionary note. There are some slaughter houses which are owned and operated by Muslims who do all their own slaughter without any outside inspection by an independent certifying organization. The Bureau of Prisons had some Muslim inmates released, who then set up their own slaughterhouses and tried to force the Feds to buy only their meat for Muslim inmates. The Feds avoided dealing with them by requiring USDA certification in addition to independent halal certification by a long established organization.

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2. "Hidden" meat by-products and alcohol derivatives.

This is one area where the rabbis ran into problems with the Muslim community. While certain gelatins and cheese ingredients are kosher, they come from kosher slaughtered animals, not halal slaughtered. And since alcohol is not a religious issue within the Jewish community, but is within the Muslim community, proper halal certification is becoming more of an issue.

E. Certification Process Summary

Details of what is involved in halal production processes and ingredient inspections are described in our book we can email to you. However, here is an "executive overview". Halal is generally much easier to do than kosher production. Yet, its requirements should not be viewed lightly or glossed over. In the US, it is in its early stages. However, internationally, halal certification has been around and thriving. For example, in Indonesia, even Dunkin Donuts has condiments packages (ketchup, etc.) with halal certification on the packets.

1. Like kosher, there are generally two levels of inspection.

(a) In a facility which makes the same products day after day using the same ingredients, the production plant and products can become certified as halal acceptable. Inspection is in the form of approving ingredients used, suppliers of ingredients and establishing production and quality procedures to assure the production qualifies as halal. Then on a periodic basis, the certifying organization can send in inspectors on both an announced and surprise basis to "audit". Examples of such products include some candies (only if alcohol-based flavors, animal-based coatings or ingredients are NOT used), cereals, granola bars, pasta producers, spices etc. Spice blends may require special inspection as well. In some cases, kosher certification is relied upon in lieu of on-site inspectors. However, ingredients must be approved. In production plants where all ingredients and suppliers used for all customers' products are always halal approved, and the production methods are acceptable, then periodic vs. continual inspections may be sufficient.

(b) In a facility where many differing products are produced, inspection is more involved. The producer must have an on-site Muslim inspector for a special halal certified production run. Whenever meat products are produced, inspection and cleaning is also more involved.

2. Clean facility and equipment for prepared meals.

Generally, before starting halal production, a Muslim inspector checks to see that all non-halal approved ingredients are not in the production area and that the equipment and the surrounding area is clean. The inspector uses observation and touch to make this determination. Anything not clean must first be cleaned and approved before commencing production. This is not as involved a process as kosher and is easier to "fix" violations through immediate, on-site cleanings.

3. Ingredients.

Ingredients and suppliers must be approved by a trained inspector and its certifying organization. Some ingredients may contain questionable sub-ingredients (see table in the "Halal Industrial Production Standards" book email). The presence of questionable sub-ingredients may require on-site certification of the main ingredient. If *haram* (forbidden) ingredients, such as alcohol, pork or non-halal meat or related by-products are not used, an

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inspector may rely upon kosher certification. Note that whether kosher is relied upon or halal inspection of the ingredient performed, ingredient certification is required by a trained and reputable organization before being authorized for use in halal production.

4. Production procedures established.

Agreed upon production procedures are established between the Muslim organization and the producer. These procedures may include incoming ingredient segregation and inspection, cleaning systems, record keeping, lot coding, packaging control, etc. Often, these are standard operating procedures which may have been modified for specific halal concerns. In some cases, it may be a modification to the kosher standards.

The certifying organization will then determine how much on-site inspection is needed, given the circumstances. As more trained inspectors become available and as more consumers demand food companies have proper certification, I personally expect that there will be more inspectors spending more time in production in the future.

5. Slaughtering procedures are complicated (less so than kosher) and are getting more stringent even now.

CONCLUSION

The kosher memo I previously sent and this halal memo are high level overviews to give you an understanding of the business of religious certification and reliance. Think of kosher and halal certification as requirements to meet specific, technical standards and processes, much like MilSpec standards and specific QA procedures. Like these standards, there is room for interpretation and variation. Consider kosher supervisors and halal inspectors as part of your suppliers' quality assurance team. Their certification and reputation provides you (the customer) the assurance of acceptance by our soldiers. Their reputation is as important as a trusted national brand name or approved MilSpec'd product you accept.

POINT OF CONTACT for further information or questions:

For more information or for email copies of the copy righted "Halal Industrial Production Standards" manual (including a table of the halal status of key ingredients), contact:

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