

Like many in New Zealand, I was so happy to see the return of my favourite restaurants and cafés – after what seemed like a distant memory - as we settled into Level One. It has been warming to see how hospitality businesses are adapting to the changes required to operate in this new environment.

One of the things the pandemic has cemented in my mind is the fantastic job our essential workers do. In addition to healthcare workers, New Zealanders can appreciate the stellar work our supermarkets, farms, food processors, transporters, and importers did to see us through this challenging time and continue to do to support our hospitality industry and the economy.

What flies under the radar for many of us, however, is New Zealand's food safety regime. This is the system that prevents us from becoming ill when we go out for food with friends. It ensures that the toddlers and babies in childcare are receiving food that won't harm them. And it means our friends and family members with allergies can make safe and informed decisions on what to eat. The risks are too big not to take food safety seriously.

Luckily, we have Haumarū Kai Aotearoa - New Zealand Food Safety, a business unit of the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) to support our food industries and ensure systems are in place to make safe and suitable food – for New Zealanders and our export markets. IANZ in turn, supports New Zealand Food Safety.

Did you know that those involved in the sale and supply of food in New Zealand are checked regularly to ensure that the food they provide is safe? Foodborne illness can make people very unwell and our food safety laws are here to protect you. This is as important in childcare centres as it is in restaurants and cafes. Under the Food Act 2014, food businesses undergo a verification soon after they open.

Verification is a check, by a competent person, to see if the business is making food safely. It includes checking areas such as equipment, cleaning, hand-washing, staff training and how the food is stored and prepared. This is generally an ongoing process and the length of time between verifications often relates to the outcome – the better the outcome, the more time between verifications.

People often think that only Councils do this verification. However, in New Zealand, competent, independent, private organisations can do this job too. And both are checked by IANZ through a process called accreditation, which ensures that their service is competent, impartial and consistent. Accreditation is an ongoing process and involves IANZ assessment teams witnessing verifications being carried out.

Delivering verification services calls for solid and sound technical understanding and good management, which in turn helps improve the quality of food safety systems. Accreditation not only helps these verifiers comply with regulations, it also helps demonstrate to potential customers and authorities that you are doing things ‘by the book’ and providing a quality service.

Organisations that are successfully accredited can add the IANZ accreditation symbol to their inspection and test reports as an internationally recognised mark of competence. The result is that you and visitors to New Zealand can have confidence in our food safety.

I’m often asked about food grading and how this fits in. Most of us are familiar with the grades displayed on the doors of a food business. After some councils verify a food business, they present the results as a grade – this can be a good motivation for food businesses as grades are visible and understandable to customers. However, not all councils undertake grading and it is not a regulatory requirement.

Remember though, that even if a Council does not use grades, you can still be assured that the cafes, restaurants and takeaways you visit will be checked as part of the verification process. This includes ensuring food for sale to consumers is safe, correctly labelled, and suitable for its intended use. If a business fails to do this, actions could range from formal warnings and increased verification visits to prosecution.

World Accreditation Day was on June 20th and had as its theme: ‘Food Safety’. It is reassuring to know that New Zealand’s food safety regime and the part IANZ plays in delivering it, is there to protect you and your family and friends next time you decide to enjoy dining out.

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