

Middle Eastern

Every geographical region has its unique cuisines and the Middle East is no exception. Although the Middle East features foods from countries as diverse as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Israel, most of the food products you will encounter in these facilities are similar to the types of foods found in American restaurants. Rather than highlighting individual food items, our regulatory focus is centered on halal and kosher foods. Halal foods are those eaten by followers of the Islamic faith who choose to adhere to a strict diet based on the teachings from their holy book, the Quran. Kosher foods are those eaten by followers of Judaism who choose to adhere to a strict diet based on the teachings of *their* holy book, the Torah.

While not as numerous as some other types of ethnic restaurants, every major urban center and many smaller cities have both halal and kosher food restaurants and markets.

Cultural Do's and Don'ts

Halal Establishments

The Middle East spans 15 countries. In Arab countries the customs vary widely but here are some general tips.

- In a halal establishment, men may shake hands with one another and women may shake hands with one another but there is no touching of any kind between unrelated men and women. If someone of the opposite sex extends their hand to you first, it is okay to proceed with a handshake. Otherwise, smile and bow your head slightly to acknowledge them. When shaking hands, the grip may be less firm than Americans use. Handshakes may be prolonged and elbows may be grasped.
- Often, after shaking hands, the man may place his open palm over his chest. This signifies that the handshake of friendship comes from his heart and is a sign of respect. Feel free to do the same.
- Do not call someone by their first name unless they tell you to.
- If someone is serving as an interpreter for the person in charge, ask the interpreter to translate both sides of the conversation and maintain eye contact with the person in charge, not the translator, during the conversation.

- The owner or manager may offer you food or drink repeatedly as a form of social etiquette. Do not misinterpret this as an attempt at bribery. Often, accepting a cup of coffee, tea or even a glass of water will be enough to satisfy their need to be hospitable. Or you may simply keep declining.
- The acceptable way to beckon someone is to hold your hand out, palm downward, and make a scooping motion with fingers. Beckoning someone with a wagging finger, with the palm upward is seen as an authoritarian/condescending signal, and will be perceived as an insult.
- Throughout the inspection process, as well as during the report writing period, you should not raise or cross your legs with the sole of your shoe facing the operator. This action is considered extremely offensive. When sitting, cross your legs at the ankles.
- In most Middle Eastern cultures, the left hand is considered unclean and reserved for hygiene. As the inspector you should always gesture and shake hands with the right hand.
- When standing or conversing, avoid leaning against a wall or standing with your hands in your pockets; both are considered disrespectful.
- The "thumbs up" gesture is considered offensive by some.
- Long, direct eye contact among men is considered normal. Staring is not considered rude or impolite.

Kosher Establishments

- Most kosher establishment operators are born Americans and do business according to American customs, with a few important exceptions.
- With Orthodox Jews, avoid touching or handshaking with the opposite sex. It's okay to pass business cards in a normal fashion, but try to avoid actual physical contact.
- Israelis tend to be informal. Don't be offended if someone calls you by your first name.
- It is normal for some Israelis or Jewish people born in America to stand closer than most Americans are accustomed to in the United States. Don't be offended.
- Maintaining direct eye contact is a normal and positive behavior.

- Kosher establishment operators can be very direct – do not be put off – a vigorous discussion is often acceptable.
- Frequent gesturing is acceptable, but pointing is considered rude by some Kosher operators.

Middle Eastern - Halal

Background

Halal is a term from the Quran, the holy book of the religion of Islam. It refers to anything which is lawful or allowed according to Allah, or God. It also refers to the Islamic set of dietary laws which regulate the preparation of food. Devout Muslims are only allowed to eat Halal food.

Foods that are considered naturally halal and permissible to eat without special preparation include:

- Milk (from cows, sheep, camels and goats)
- Honey
- Fish
- Plants which are not intoxicants
- Fresh or naturally frozen vegetables
- Fresh or dried fruits
- Legumes and nuts like peanuts, cashew nuts, hazel nuts, walnuts, etc.
- Grains such as wheat, rice, rye, barley, oats, etc.

Animals such as cows, sheep, goats, deer, moose, chickens, ducks and game birds are also halal, but they must be slaughtered according to Islamic rites in order to be suitable for consumption.

The primary halal concern for U.S. food inspectors relates to meats.

Preparation Procedure

Halal laws require that animals be slaughtered in a precise manner by individuals who are authorized to do so. The procedure involves slitting the animal's throat in such a way that the three main blood vessels are cut, while pronouncing the name of Allah or reciting a blessing which contains the name of Allah.

Regulatory Concern – Honest Presentation

(Food safety concerns for halal foods are the same as they are for non-halal foods. The following concerns relate to economic fraud.)

Markets that sell halal meats purchase their products only from processing sources that have been sanctioned by an official halal accreditation source. The processor is issued a certificate by the accreditation organization in the region or state. Only products that meet the strict halal standard can be labeled as such.

Storage – No halal food can be stored with non-halal foods. The primary concern is whether or not markets and restaurants selling or serving halal foods are honestly presenting them. In other words, establishments that are not exclusively halal may be storing halal meats with meats that have not been processed according to halal methods.

Control Measures

- Look for the halal certificate in markets that indicate they are a halal market (usually posted on a wall or other visible location).
- If the facility indicates that only halal foods are sold there, then ask to see copies of the invoices, which should indicate the distributor or processor who sold the products to them. A traceback can be done to determine if the meats came from an approved halal source.
- Check packaging for halal labels indicating approved source.
- Check to be sure that halal products are not being stored with non-halal products.

Additional Concern – Thermometer Use

When testing halal food temperatures, you must use a thermometer that has not been used on non-halal products. Using a thermometer that has been used for non-halal products would be considered contamination (economic adulteration) and the establishment would be required by Islamic law to throw it away. Some regulatory agencies require halal establishments to provide their own thermometers which must be approved by the regulatory authority. Be aware of your agency's protocol and be prepared to act accordingly.

Middle Eastern - Kosher

Background

Kosher is a term used in Judaism that refers to that which is proper and meets accepted rules and standards. It also refers to food that is prepared in accordance with Jewish dietary laws. Orthodox Jews are only allowed to eat kosher foods.

Kosher relates to the ingredients and to the cleanliness of the cooking process, and to the health and humane slaughter of animals. In a world where most of the foods we eat are processed in mass quantities in large facilities, it is necessary for a rabbi or other certified official to inspect the processes to be sure that only kosher ingredients and processes are being used.

Under kosher laws, certain foods may not be eaten, such as pork or shellfish; meat and dairy may not be eaten at the same meal; and animals must be slaughtered in accordance with Jewish law. The law requires that animals be slaughtered in a precise and humane manner by individuals who are authorized to do so. The procedure involves slitting the animal's throat with a single stroke in such a way that the three main blood vessels are cut and the animal dies very quickly.

The primary concern for food inspectors is whether or not markets and restaurants selling or serving kosher foods are honestly presenting them.

Preparation Procedure

Under kosher law, certain foods must always be separated from others. Meat dishes and dairy dishes must never be mixed or eaten during the same meal. They cannot be prepared together, cooked together, stored together, washed together, prepared or eaten with the same utensils, pots and pans or off of the same dishes. The same rule applies to fish and meat products.

When non-kosher restaurants offer some kosher items on their menu, the above rules would still apply. Therefore, the primary concern is whether or not markets and restaurants selling or serving kosher foods are honestly presenting them. This concern is greater in non-kosher facilities that offer kosher foods.

Regulatory Concern - Honest Presentation

(Food safety concerns for kosher foods are the same as they are for non-kosher foods. The following concerns relate to economic fraud.)

Products that have been certified as kosher are labeled as such, with the mark identifying the rabbi or organization that certified the product. The process of certification involves examining the ingredients used to make the food, examining the process by which the food is prepared, and periodically inspecting the processing facilities to make sure that kosher standards are maintained.

In addition, many states require kosher restaurants and non-kosher facilities that offer some kosher items on their menu to display a certificate on which they display the name of their rabbinic certifier and how often inspections take place.

Under kosher law, food combinations such as dairy products and meat or fish and meat cannot be stored together, prepared or cooked together, cooked using the same utensils, pots and pans, eaten during the same meal or eaten off the same dishes.

Control Measures

- If the state requires such, look for the kosher certificate (usually posted on a wall or other visible location).
- Check product packaging and/or invoices for the latest shipments to confirm that the meats, fish, dairy and any other processed product used in kosher cooking come from a kosher-approved source.
- Check to ascertain that dairy products are not being stored or prepared with meat products.
- Check to ascertain that fish is not being stored or prepared with meat products.
- Check to ascertain that kosher products are not being stored or prepared with non-kosher products.
- When inspecting a restaurant that is not Jewish or not completely kosher but sells or serves kosher food items, look at the menu to determine what those items are and then check to confirm that kosher rules are being applied to ensure that the products are being honestly presented.

Additional Concern – Thermometer Use

When testing kosher food temperatures, inspectors must use a thermometer that has not been used on non-kosher products. Using a thermometer that has been used for non-kosher products would be considered contamination (economic adulteration) and the establishment would be required by Jewish dietary law to throw it away. Also, the same thermometer cannot be used for meat and dairy products. Some regulatory agencies require establishments selling or serving kosher foods to provide their own thermometers which must be approved by the regulatory authority. Be aware of your agency's protocol and be prepared to act accordingly.