

# So just how safe is the food in Australia?

(The four factors that influence food  
safety in Australia)

By

Rachelle Williams

*The Green*

*Food Safety Coach*

## **Copyright Notice**

This work is copyrighted and is not to be copied or distributed without the express written permission of *AnYi Pty Ltd*.

## **Disclaimer**

This guide is a simple explanation of food safety in Australia and the role of the general public in keeping it safe.

Nothing in this book is intended as legal advice and both the author and *AnYi Pty Ltd* accept no liability for any results caused by any person or business acting on anything in this guide.

The reader is to be aware that this book was prepared from the food safety requirements as they existed at that time, and therefore it is recommended that the reader refer to [www.foodstandards.gov.au](http://www.foodstandards.gov.au) to determine the current specific requirements.

## **About *AnYi Pty Ltd***

For nearly 20 years AnYi Pty Ltd, as **The Green Food Safety Coach**, has been helping small to medium sized food safety business in Queensland and across the country meet their food safety requirements.

HACCP programs and / or quality systems have been developed and then successfully achieved certification. Clients have included a national supermarket chain, a bakery on the Sunshine Coast and a major Brisbane private hospital.

Certified food safety programs have been developed for manufacturers, aged care centres, child care centres, retail food operations, and function centres.

All programs are developed to include basic quality and safety issues as well, because food safety does not exist in a business alone.

Food safety training is tailored to the specific business and several clients have been utilising us for their food safety training for at least five years.

This guide is intended to give the reader a brief summary of food safety in Australia and what it means to the general public.

## **WHY IS FOOD SAFETY IMPORTANT**

All consumers of food (including drinks) have the right to expect that the product being consumed will; not harm them, be nutritious and be appealing to the senses.

No-one should expect to eat food that will harm them and that is what food safety is all about - processes, packaging, equipment, systems and people all working together to ensure that products are safe to consume.

Even products like the poisonous puff type fish, a delicacy in Japan, is specially prepared by highly trained chefs to reduce the risk of the fish causing harm. The people who eat this product are relying on those skills, and the processes in place, to ensure that the food is safe.

This may seem like an extreme example of food safety, but some of our own population in Australia, who are highly allergic to peanuts or other allergens, take a risk every time they eat something. They, like the puff fish consumers in Japan have the right to products that won't harm them.

### ***Are there any legal requirements for food safety?***

Food safety in Australia is governed by a set of nationally agreed requirements, the Food Safety Standards. These standards are a part of the Food Standards Code ([www.foodstandards.gov.au](http://www.foodstandards.gov.au)). All food businesses (including community groups) must meet the relevant parts of these Standards.

Legal requirements are however only of the four factors determining how safe our food is in Australia.

## THE FOUR FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE FOOD SAFETY IN AUSTRALIA

All of the following four factors have a strong part to play in ensuring that Australia's international reputation for safe food is maintained.

### **Factor One – Food Law**

Australia is a member of a worldwide community of countries that share information about food safety. Each country may have slightly different ways of doing things, but there is a great deal of sharing of methods and ideas. This contributes to the creation of common food laws. Constant scientific research around the world into a huge variety of food related issues, also contributes to these laws. These laws are always being reviewed and adjusted according to the scientific research and innovation.

The Codex Alimentarius is such a food law and, in part, is the universal standard for a type of food safety control called HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points). This is considered by many to be the best system for controlling food safety. When businesses in Australia develop their own HACCP programs, they are based on the fundamental Codex principles.

All countries have some form of a monitoring / co-ordinating body responsible for food safety at a national level. In Australia and New Zealand, we have a joint body called Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ). This body is responsible for developing and co-ordinating our own set of national food laws, the Food Standards Code ([www.foodstandards.gov.au](http://www.foodstandards.gov.au) or [www.foodstandards.gov.nz](http://www.foodstandards.gov.nz)). It has a major role in co-ordinating the Food Recalls in Australia. Education is also a significant part of the ongoing work of FSANZ.

The Food Standards Code contains all the requirements for;

- hygienic construction of food premises (eg; contact surfaces to be of a non permeable material like food grade stainless steel)
- facilities required in a food premises (eg; separate hand washing sink in a deli)
- Labelling of all foods (including drinks)
- Composition of all foods (including drinks)
- Food safety systems (eg; temperature control, product recall, supplier control) – the Food Safety Standards (not all of which is applicable in New Zealand).

For all Australian food businesses involved in export, it is a requirement that they be monitored by Border Force. This monitoring can range from having an Officer permanently located at the business to regular audits by an Officer – depending upon the business and what it produces, as an example; exporting abattoirs are very tightly monitored by Border Force. There are set Guidelines that these businesses must meet.

As each Australian state and territory is responsible for food safety within it's boundaries, they each have their own Food Act, which effectively makes the Food Standards Code the law in that state / territory.

Although food safety within each state / territory is fundamentally the responsibility of the health department, there may be some separation of the various duties entailed in the monitoring and controlling of food safety, for example; in Queensland, a state body called Safe Food Production Queensland has responsibility for monitoring food businesses like delis, butchers, egg producers and other similar businesses. The businesses monitored by Safe Food Production Qld, and other similar bodies across other states / territories, are required to have regular audits to ensure they are meeting the

Food Safety Standards (and specific Food Safety Schemes for set foods).

The state / territory governments also have the responsibility of doing random checks of domestic and imported products to ensure compliance with the Food Standards Code. The checks include a complete analysis of the food against the label and the Standard. Even though food businesses are for the most part self-regulating in terms of food safety, these checks are an essential method to ensure this compliance. As a result of some of these checks, there have been a number of product recalls recently due to undeclared allergens. So the system is working well to protect the consumers of our food.

With the sheer number of food businesses within Australia, it would be physically impossible and not economically viable, for the State / Territory governments to monitor them all. Therefore the day to day monitoring and compliance control of the Food Safety Standards is the responsibility of the local councils, and particularly their Environmental Health Officers. These officers are not permitted to monitor any government food businesses (eg; state school canteens) as these are the responsibility of the State / Territory health departments.

Environmental Health Officers (EHO) have four main roles; compliance monitoring, registration, education and investigation;

- [Compliance Monitoring](#) – The EHOs are required to do inspections against the Food Standards Code, on all food businesses within the council's boundaries. Inspection rates are dependent upon the risk of the business. High risk businesses (eg; Private Nursing Homes) will require more inspections than low risk businesses (eg; a breadcrumb manufacturer).

# AnYi

- **Registration** – all food businesses are required to be registered with their local council. The council has the right to charge a fee for this registration, and for any licences and inspections as well. All food businesses (including Community Groups) have to have a licence to operate a food business. A food stall at a show has to have a licence, as does the show itself. The councils will usually charge a substantially lower licence fee for community groups.
- **Education** – Most councils are not able to put as much time and resources into this aspect as they would like, as the primary functions of the EHOs are in compliance monitoring and registration, and therefore, often there is simply not enough time left to do as much education as they would like. There are three aspects to education; community, new businesses and current businesses

**Community education** - Some Councils use the National Food Safety Week (in November) as the main education tool for the year and run colouring contests in schools, morning teas or giveaways (like eskies) etc – which certainly highlights food safety in their community. Others use fliers and posters in local libraries throughout the year.

**New Businesses** – All new food businesses should contact their local councils before starting business, to become registered and licensed. At this time the EHO will pass on a variety of information to the business, including reference materials about their food safety obligations and requirements.

**Current Businesses** – As there will always be improvements and changes to the Food Law, the council is instrumental in passing notification of these changes to all the existing businesses in their areas.

- Investigation – If there is a complaint against a food business about food safety issues (eg; a food poisoning incident or event), the EHO has a significant role in the investigation. This may include; visiting the business, inspections, microbiological and / or chemical testing, and closing the business down temporarily. The investigation may lead to the business being; temporarily closed, required to run a Product Recall, fined, required to correct any identified problems, taken to court, permanently closed, and potentially the owner / manager gaoled if there was a death from the identified problem and the business was found to be liable.

Food businesses must not only meet the specific requirements of the Food Standards Code, they must also meet other applicable legislation, both state / territory and federal. A good example is the Trade Practice Act or the various Acts related to Weights and Measures. Depending upon the legislation, these are monitored by several departments.

There are also Australian Standards which food businesses will meet, a good example is AS 4709 – 2001 (Guide to cleaning and sanitizing of plant and equipment in the food industry) and all the future versions of it.

Depending upon what product each business is making and their target markets, as to whether they also want, or need, to meet other standards beside the Food Standards Code. As an example, many industries have Codes of Practice, which it is expected that businesses within those industries will meet.

## **Factor Two – Industry Responsibilities**

According to the Food Standards Code, a food business is effectively any business or group that supplies (by selling) food as part, or all of what it supplies. Therefore, even a sports club having a public sausage sizzle (with the sausage on sale) is a food business, as is a hairdresser that supplies a cup of tea / coffee to their clients during the haircut. All of these “food businesses” have their own specific food safety obligations as required by the Food Standards Code.

The fundamental concepts behind food safety are to;

- Stop anything that shouldn't be there from getting into the food /drink.
- Stop anything that is already there, from growing to a point where it can harm anyone.

The Food Law in Australia is dedicated to these two concepts, but it is essential that businesses also do the right thing morally and legally. As an example, HACCP as mentioned in Factor One, is considered by many to be the international standard for a food safety system, it is not however a legal requirement in Australia for most food businesses. Although many businesses develop a HACCP based food safety program because it gives good moral and financial protection for the business and it's customers.

Australia does have a reputation internationally as having safe food, the food law has a part in that, as do the various controls that the food industry has in place. There are many food safety controls that food businesses either have to, or simply do, put in place to provide themselves and their customers with the food safety that best meets their legal, moral and financial needs. The following is a short summary of some of the controls that food businesses, of all sorts, must consider and develop, as required, to ensure that the food they are supplying is safe;

- **Allergen Control** - is a mandatory requirement for food business, included are; labelling issues (eg; “may contain traces of...” and declaring the intended allergens in the ingredient list), staff training, cleaning, allergen testing, inspections, scheduling, traceability, supplier control and stock rotation.
- **Temperature Control** - is a mandatory requirement for food businesses, included are; use of a thermometer with a minimum of 1°C increments, some form of record to prove that the thermometer is being used, keeping cold food cold (<5°C), keeping hot food hot (> 60°C), thawing food properly in the chiller, transporting food appropriately, managing the Temperature Danger Zone (including the amount of time foods are in “the Zone”), training, documented methods for doing temperature checks, checks of received product, checks of cooling chickens, manual vs. automated temperature control, and calibration of temperature checking tools (including thermometers).
- **Labelling** - is a mandatory requirement for food businesses, included are; contact details, ingredient list (including percentage labelling), allergen declarations, mandatory warnings, print colour, type & size, Display Labelling, Cake Stalls and other non commercial labelling, best before / use by dates, weights / volumes, use & storage conditions, Country of Origin, nutritional panels, and food names / descriptions.
- **Supplier Control** - is a mandatory requirement for food businesses, included are; specifications on quality, safety etc for the products / raw materials, checks on receipt, Safety Data Sheets (SDSs) for cleaning and other chemicals, an Approved Supplier List, training documented methods & records, and assurances of food safety.

- **Stock Rotation and Traceability** – a fundamental business principle and essential to food safety. Includes; operating under a “First In First Out” (FIFO) system, ability to be able to track all materials within the business from receipt to despatch, ability to be able to track sales of all product, batch codes down to the level of individual machines depending upon the actual business, tracking of allergens through the process, the National Livestock Identification Scheme (NLIS) and other similar tracking programs, training and documented methods & records.
- **Contamination Control (including Cross Contamination)** – this issue addresses the first of the Food Safety Concepts – stopping anything that shouldn’t be in the food from getting there. The controls businesses use include; hairnets, use of gloves as required, designated coloured cutting boards & other tools / equipment, specially designed uniforms, metal detectors to monitor metal contamination on production lines (can detect down to 1.5mm of iron based metals and then reject any affected product), glass procedures (including specific cleaning equipment for glass breakages), X Rays (can be used on many products, including soups in cans), training, documented procedures, records (eg; Contamination Reports), constantly manned inspection points along a production line, filters & sieves, inspections and audits.
- **Product Recall Program** - is a mandatory requirement for specific types of food businesses (eg; importers and manufacturers), included are the type of recall, documented methods based on the latest Recall Guidelines, Mock Recalls as required, Recall Records, ability to be able to track materials up and down the supply chain, training, a recall committee (with clearly defined roles) and Co-ordinator

## **AnYi**

- **Cleaning and Pest Control** – all businesses are expected to address these issues and the controls may include; a Pest Log (to record all pest activity and corrective actions), a Pest Control Specification with the pest contractor, a Cleaning Schedule, documented cleaning methods, a Cleaning Record, and training

The controls listed above are just some of the methods food businesses use to ensure that the food they supply is safe. It is by no means extensive and there are many more general and specific controls in operation. Businesses must constantly adjust these controls based on the food law, and on what the market is requiring.

## Factor Three – Market needs and expectations

Who, three years ago, would have thought about commercially available Low Carb or wholegrain foods? There are now a variety of Low Carb or wholegrain products available in our supermarkets. What trends are currently happening that our food industry has to work on?

The market is constantly changing and the food industry is always working on trying to meet these new demands and expectations. The Product Development Departments of food businesses are continually working on new products to meet these demands. The trick is to try to be the first out in the market, so it is important that food businesses are constantly monitoring their markets.

Other examples of market driven needs are; lowering cholesterol table spreads, probiotics and low GI foods. Food law and food businesses have had to adapt to these new products, for example; the Food Standards Code now includes requirements for cholesterol lowering claims that are on the packaging, this sort of information was not required five years ago.

Not only are there market changes, but also new innovations / equipment / processes / packaging that allow businesses to create new products in their ranges and to meet or exceed customer expectations. As an example; the advent of special packaging and equipment allowed for the development of UHT products like milk and custard. This allows people to have an easily transported and safe product that can be stored for long periods on the shelf – fridges are only necessary when the product is opened. Have you noticed now with these products,

how the openings are getting easier - once again innovations are making a better product for the market.

New processes, like Genetic Modification and Irradiation, are often controversial but have huge potential long term benefits to the foods that already exist and those of the future. There are now GM oils available for purchase in our supermarkets, but if they meet specific composition requirements they must be labelled as containing GM material. This is another example of how the law and business have adapted to meet market needs or expectations of food safety.

There are an increasing number of products in the market displaying a symbol showing that the product is approved for Halal. This is an approval against Islamic faith requirements showing that the food meets that standard and is therefore suitable for those of the Islamic faith to consume. This is not about whether the product could physically harm the consumer but is about meeting religious requirements. There is an increasing expectation within the market that food products need to be approved for these reasons as well. To receive this approval, the food and business need to be audited against the required standards and then approved by a recognised certifying body. The approval is not easy to achieve, and there are set standards that must be met, including; processing methods, regular audits, fees, and testing as required. A similar program is also in operation for food that is safe for consumption by those of the Jewish faith.

This is yet another example of how businesses are working to ensure that their products are “safe” for people to eat.

The National Heart Foundation had a “Tick” program that had significant impact with the general public and many foods in the market carry this very well known symbol. To be able to use this symbol, the food had to meet very carefully and

## **AnYi**

scientifically established, and controlled nutritional standards (depending upon the type of food). There was initial and ongoing testing, set conditions in which the symbol could be used and a fee for the use of it. Food businesses that used this program were determined to ensure that their products are recognised in a specific market.

The Food Standards Code does not specifically state (except under particular conditions, eg; when there are wounds or skin conditions on the hands) that gloves have to be worn when handling food, as long as the hands are clean and don't contaminate the food. It is however, expected by the public that gloves will be worn when handling foods. Once again, businesses adapt to market expectations of food safety, even though it is not always necessary legally.

## **Factor Four – What happens at home**

At the end of the day, it does not matter how good the food law is, or how much food safety control food businesses have, or what the market expects, it all comes down to what happens to the food when it leaves the supermarket.

We have around 4.1 million cases of food poisoning in this country every year (around a third of us statistically will get food poisoning this year) with a significant amount of that coming from home based cooking (Note: information from the National Food Safety Week 2003).

The single most important factor in ensuring that food is safe in Australia is what people do with it at home or when at BBQs and other food events / functions.

Even if the temperature of a food has been carefully controlled and monitored as per the Food Safety Standards, all through the production, transport and storage steps, it can be totally destroyed by someone not putting in an esky for the hour drive home and then forgetting to put it straight in the Fridge when they get there.

The following are just some of the simple things that everyone should do to stop food poisoning at home or when out;

- Keep Hot foods HOT – steaming hot (at least 60°C)
- Keep Cold foods COLD – below 5°C, even when transporting it.
- Keep a close eye on how long foods are out at buffets, picnics and BBQs etc, get them back into the fridge / esky as soon as you can.
- If you have to make a choice about putting the drinks or food in the esky – it is always the food.

## AnYi

- Wash hands with hot water and soap before handling foods, between food types, after going to the toilet, and after smoking or eating or changing nappies or handling animals.
- Don't use the tea towels for wiping your hands – have and use a separate hand towel. Disposable paper towel is best. Put the hand towel in the wash at the end of the day and replace with a fresh one the next day.
- If you can't use water to wash your hands, use antibacterial wipes or hand wash / gel.
- Don't use wooden boards for cutting or preparing foods
- Use plastic, hardened glass or marble cutting boards – note: glass boards tend to blunt knives.
- Wash (with hot water and detergent) all knives, cutting boards and other tools between food types and after use.
- Use clean cloths for cleaning – colour coded for different uses (eg; red for the floor, blue for the bench)
- Keep all food contact surfaces clean by cleaning between foods and after use
- Place tea towels in the wash at the end of the day and put out fresh ones the next morning.
- Thaw foods (particularly meats) in covered containers in the bottom of the fridge – not on the bench at any time.
- Freeze foods in small quantities (eg; Chinese container size) – this means consistent freezing and helps thawing.
- Keep your fridge tidy and do regular checks to ensure that no "mouldy foods" get a chance to grow. Look after your fridge and it will look after you.

## **SUMMARY**

### **So just how safe is the food in Australia?**

We have an international reputation for having some of the toughest food safety law in the world.

Our food industry is generally very committed to meeting it's legal, moral and financial obligations – or even, exceeding these. As a food technologist, I am proud to say that I work in the Australian Food Industry, because of this commitment.

The law and food industry are always working toward exceeding the food safety expectations of the market.

Both the food industry and governments are strongly committed to community education through National Food Safety Week and other means, so that the public are constantly being made aware of their responsibilities in food safety.

### **So just how safe is the food in Australia?**

The public can feel very confident, about the safety of the Australian food that is available to them – but in the end, it all comes down to them.

## OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The following is a short list of contacts for more information;

### AnYi Pty Ltd

Provides support to food businesses in meeting their food safety requirements and training.

Also available to present tailored allergen, product labelling and food safety seminars, and workshops to businesses, industry associations and groups.

- Contact –Rachelle Williams
- Phone – 07 5544 3220
- Email – [anyi@howsafeisyourfood.com.au](mailto:anyi@howsafeisyourfood.com.au)
- Address – 186 Mt Barney Rd. Barney View Qld. 4287

### Food Standards Australia New Zealand

Responsible for preparing and administering the food law in Australia and New Zealand. This government body is responsible for the Food Standards Code, which details all the labelling, composition, regulation and food safety requirements for all food businesses (including community groups). It also has a key role in the monitoring and control of Food Product Recalls.

The Food Standards Code (including the Food Safety Standards) can be found at **[www.foodstandards.gov.au](http://www.foodstandards.gov.au)**.

- Phone Number – 02 6271 2241
- Fax – 02 6271 2278
- Email – [info@foodstandards.gov.au](mailto:info@foodstandards.gov.au)
- Address – PO Box 7186, Canberra Business Centre. ACT. 2610

## State / Territory Government – Public or Environmental Health Units

Responsible for monitoring business compliance to the Food Standards Code. Can be contacted through the Health Department in each State / Territory.

## Local Council Environmental Health Officers

Responsible for the day to day monitoring of business compliance to the Food Standards Code (particularly the Food Safety Standards), and for registering local food businesses. Can be contacted at your local council.

## Food Safety Information Council

A non government body with members from; government, industry, universities and the public. Some of Australia's leading food safety experts are members of the FSIC. It is dedicated to promoting food safety within our community. The main focus is on National Food Safety Week in November, and produces media releases, and publications.

- Phone – [0407 626 688](tel:0407626688)
- Email – [info@foodsafety.asn.au](mailto:info@foodsafety.asn.au)
- Website – [www.foodsafety.asn.au](http://www.foodsafety.asn.au)