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trading standards law explained

Food labelling for caterers

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Although the United Kingdom left the European Union (EU) in 2021, certain pieces of legislation (known as 'assimilated law') continue to apply until such time as they are replaced by new UK legislation, revoked or permitted to expire. This means that our guidance still contains references to legislation that originated from the EU.

In this guide, the words 'must' or 'must not' are used where there is a legal requirement to do (or not do) something. The word 'should' is used where there is established legal guidance or best practice that is likely to help you avoid breaking the law.

This guidance is for England and Wales
There are fewer labelling requirements for food sold from mass caterers* than for prepacked food, but any

information that you do provide must be accurate and not misleading. This applies to all information, whether provided in writing (such as on a menu or chalkboard) or verbally (in response to a customer's question, for example).

[*In assimilated Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 *on the provision of food information to consumers*, "'mass caterer' means any establishment (including a vehicle or a fixed or mobile stall), such as restaurants, canteens, schools, hospitals and catering enterprises in which, in the course of a business, food is prepared to be ready for consumption by the final consumer". Therefore, the term applies to any business that prepares food so that it is ready to be eaten by the consumer without further preparation.]

Common descriptions used in catering

Scampi

Only products made from complete wholetails of the species *Nephrops norvegicus* may be referred to as 'wholetail scampi' or 'scampi'. The term 'wholetail scampi' must not be used for products made from reformed scampi pieces; this must be described as 'reformed scampi'.

King prawn

This description can only be used where the prawns are one of three specific species of prawn named on the UK commercial designations of fish web page, which is produced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). They must also be the correct size.

Tiger prawn

This description can only be used where the prawns are one of the species named in the UK commercial designations of fish list that may be described as such.

Chicken fillet and breast

These terms must not be used where the chicken has been chopped and shaped. Care must also be taken to check that you are not buying chicken with added water and other proteins, such as from another animal species or derived from milk. If your chicken should be labelled as containing other ingredients, you may be breaking the law if you fail to make it clear to consumers that the product does not contain 100% pure chicken meat.

Products containing meat

Sausages, beef burgers, pasties, pies, sausage rolls, etc have legal compositional requirements regarding the minimum meat content. 'Composition of products containing meat' has more information about the specific requirements of these foods.

A food cannot be called a sausage, pasty, etc unless it complies with the minimum meat content for that product. Products described as 'ham' should be sliced from a whole cured piece of meat, from the hindquarters of a pig. Products that are from the shoulder or are 'formed', 'reformed' or contain more than 5% water by weight of the finished product must be correctly described - for example, 'Cured formed pork shoulder with not more than 10% added water'.

Roast

This description should not be used where a food has been steamed and flash roasted. It should only be used when a meat has been subjected to conventional oven cooking for at least 30 minutes at a temperature high enough to give all the characteristics of roasted meat.

Smoked

This description should only be used where the product has been subject to a smoking process. Where only a smoke flavouring has been added, the description 'smoke flavour' should be used.

Vegetarian / vegan

Any vegetarian dishes must have been produced without any contact or contamination with meat, fish or seafood. This includes using separate oils for frying vegetarian dishes and careful checking of sauce ingredients. Some cheeses contain rennet, which is an animal by-product and therefore may not be suitable for vegetarians; similarly, Worcestershire Sauce may contain anchovies. You should also ensure that you have separate chopping boards and utensils to avoid cross contamination.

What different people consider to be 'vegan' varies greatly and, as such, even greater care must be taken when describing dishes as vegan. To avoid complaints regarding vegan dishes, it is best to avoid ingredients that involve animals in any stage of their production; strict vegans will not eat honey or eggs, for example.

Note: there is no legal definition of vegetarian or vegan.

Free from nuts, wheat, milk, shellfish

You need to provide information to consumers about which allergens each of your products or dishes contains. Particular care should be taken with food described as suitable for allergy sufferers, either via a written description or verbally. You need to exercise extreme caution, particularly in relation to dairy- and nut-allergic consumers, some of whom could suffer a fatal reaction from minute levels of contamination. For more information, see 'Food allergens and intolerance'.

Health claims

A health claim is any claim that states, suggests or implies that there is a relationship between health and

a food. Common examples used by mass caterers include 'healthy', 'superfood' and 'good for you'.

Health claims can be made in any medium, including on menus, noticeboards, etc.

Health claims are permitted but should generally be avoided; only certain claims can be made, and you must provide mandatory information alongside them.

For more information, see 'Nutrition and health claims'.

Other commonly misdescribed food or ingredients

- 'imitation cheese analogue' described as 'cheese' on pizzas
- 'crab' when the product is made from 'crabsticks'
- 'margarine' described as butter - for example, 'bread and butter'
- 'non-brewed condiment' described as 'vinegar'

Portion sizes

Descriptions (such as 'pancake rolls (6)' or '½ duck') must be accurate.

Colours

The law sets maximum levels for colours in various foods, and only certain colours may be used. Some sauces (such as sweet-and-sour and tandoori spice mixes) have occasionally been found to contain excess colours. Care should be taken when making these if you use colours or mixes containing colours. More information can be found in 'Colours and other additives in food'.

Protected food names

Cornish Pasties and Traditional Cumberland Sausages are two examples of products that have been accredited with protected status. Any products using these names must comply with the compositional and/or origin requirements. More information on protected food names, including a list of UK registered names, is available on the GOV.UK website.

Other legal labelling requirements

Food containing irradiated ingredients must show a description stating that they are 'irradiated' or 'treated with ionising radiation'.

Raw milk must have an accompanying description: 'Milk supplied in this establishment has not been heat-treated and therefore may contain organisms harmful to health'.

If a cheese has been made from unpasteurised milk, a suitable warning should be given.

Customers must be notified of any food that contains genetically modified (GM) ingredients or has been cooked using GM oil.

Good practice

- check that the descriptions you provide are correct and match those given by your supplier (on order forms, delivery documents, invoices or on product packaging) - for example, if the supplier description is 'reformed scampi', the menu description should also be 'reformed scampi'. Check with your supplier if you are in any doubt about the accuracy of your descriptions
- remember that product specifications may change over time, so you need to keep checking
- take particular care when you change supplier
- advise customers of any changes to product descriptions. If the change is permanent, the menu will need to be amended
- always ensure that you and all employees follow the instructions supplied with any seasoning / colour. If there are no instructions, or if they are not clear, ask your supplier for further details in writing. Do not guess or rely on verbal information

Calorie labelling

Larger businesses in England have to provide calorie information for the food and drink that they sell. This makes it easier for consumers to make informed, healthier decisions when making purchases. Any mass catering business with 250 or more employees must comply. If part of a franchise, the total number of employees within the franchise will apply to each individual business.

Smaller businesses, although not required to provide the calorie labelling information, are encouraged to do so. If you choose to give information about calorie or other nutrient content of your dishes, we would suggest that you obtain advice from your local Trading Standards or Environmental Health service (depending on the arrangements in your area).

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has produced guidance on calorie labelling in the out-of-home sector.

Catering waste

For information on the legal disposal of catering waste, see 'Disposal of surplus food'.

Trading Standards

For more information on the work of Trading Standards services - and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law - please see 'Trading Standards: powers, enforcement and penalties'.

In this update

General detail added.

Last reviewed / updated: November 2025

Key legislation

- Food Safety Act 1990

- assimilated Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 *on the provision of food information to consumers*
- Fish Labelling Regulations 2013
- Fish Labelling (Wales) Regulations 2013
- Food Information Regulations 2014
- Food Information (Wales) Regulations 2014
- Calorie Labelling (Out of Home Sector) (England) Regulations 2021

Please note

This information is intended for guidance; only the courts can give an authoritative interpretation of the law.

The guide's 'Key legislation' links go to the legislation.gov.uk website. The site usually updates the legislation to include any amendments made to it. However, this is not always the case. Information on all changes made to legislation can be found by following the above links and clicking on the 'More Resources' tab.

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