

Hospitalitynews

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Unity & strength

Key hospitality industry players recently gathered at a food safety roundtable in the wake of the current "food scandal" that has plagued Lebanon

Hosted at Hospitality Services offices in Beirut, Nagi Morkos, managing partner, Hodema, and the roundtable moderator, gathered a diverse group of restaurateurs, health professionals, and industry notables, who all discussed their individual challenges and offered advice and solutions. What transpired was a rich montage of insights from all levels of the field. If anything was clear, it was the group's ability to tackle the issue with one unified voice; both currently and for the future.

How is the Lebanese Franchise Association approaching the current food crisis?

Charles Arbid,

president, Lebanese Franchise Association

"We have three levels to consider. As a first reaction to the food scandal, we have to work to build a culture of food safety in Lebanon. Therefore in collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce, the Lebanese Franchise Association (LFA) will be creating an academy, which will be active at the beginning of 2015. The academy will offer an eight-hour, tested and certified course in basic food safety procedure, which is free-of-charge and open to anyone in the industry. The certificate will be given by two major companies in the field, GWR and Boecker. Secondly, prevention should begin at the source of the supply chain, both locally and with imports. Thirdly, there needs to be a code of ethics for the industry in Lebanon, which we are currently working on and writing. The code of ethics needs to be built upon, accepted, signed and implemented as a culture, system and a framework."

What role is Boecker playing in the current crisis?

Michel Bayoud CEO, Boecker

"We are pleased to see that the private sector took a serious approach in containing

the food safety crisis. Regionally, we have supported and advised countries in their efforts of drafting food safety laws and we are very happy to be part of the local initiatives that are taking place. Boecker has been a pioneer in food safety since 1998 and will continue to support the private sector in its quest for elevating food safety standards, while also supporting the local authorities that are lobbying to have an effective food safety law in Lebanon. This has always been our responsibility in the markets in which we operate. We shall continue to actively support strategically, not only businesses, but also the community at large".

What impact is the current crisis having on your restaurants?

Fawzi Ghantous

general manager, Found'd

"Regarding the impact of the scandal, nothing has changed for us because we already implemented a long time ago the Hazard Analysis & Critical Control Point (HACCP). The number of consumers in our restaurants has not decreased. The scandal, however, creates awareness among consumers, which may give them doubts about the food and encourage them to make more complaints than usual. Our meat, chicken and fish are the same healthy standard as before the crisis. We have taken measures but nothing has changed."

How are you allaying the fears of your consumers?

Tony Boustany,

country director, Antventure

"We follow a quality standard assurance, whereby twice weekly we send five to six products from our central kitchen and all our branches to the laboratory to be tested. It takes five to six days to be processed and for the results to be returned, by which time that particular batch would have been consumed

by diners. Therefore we cannot rely on that procedure. We work with an external group, GWR, which does everything related to quality assurance, as well as providing a mystery guest service, both locally in Lebanon and regionally. Because we are located in two malls in Lebanon (ABC and City Mall) we also have relations with the Lebanese Association for Food Safety (LAFS), who visit our outlets frequently and send us a report through the management of the malls. Our main concern is with the raw material from suppliers, which cannot be controlled."

What is the solution?

Aref Saade,

treasurer, Syndicate of Owners of Restaurants, Cafes, Nightclubs & Pastries in Lebanon

"The solution isn't easy, but the media should stop attacking people and be more supportive in its approach. Another problem is the suppliers. We have proposed a book of health rules and the solution is to sit together and force restaurants to abide by the rules. We also need to start at the bottom of the chain working upwards to the top; analyzing the source through to the suppliers and beyond."

What can the private sector do better to face this problem, both now and in the future?

Nabil Rizkallah,

general manager, GWR Consulting

"Ironically some of the restaurants named in the food scandal have the best and most implemented food safety standards in place. There must be a focus on suppliers, water and general standards. But which institution should implement these standards? The value chain – from farm to fork – should be analyzed. Currently, due to a law that states that imported meats cannot be frozen, restaurants and other food outlets are being



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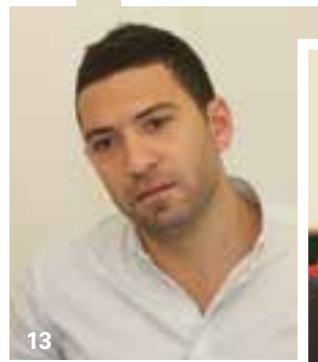
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forced to purchase supplies that are sourced from the local slaughterhouse in Lebanon. Another problem is that restaurants are asking the government to identify what they will put in place as safeguards, how they will audit foodstuffs, and where to start the control. There needs to be a focus on procedures; the way samples are taken from restaurants, taking meat and/or chicken that has been processed rather than when it is raw food, which is something Tony Ramy, president of The Syndicate, has pushed. All players in the restaurant sector need to be members of The Syndicate to make it stronger. The private sector is trying to unify in front of the public sector, to give strength and confidence and better lobbying powers. Working as one, we can then only do business with those suppliers who are certified in the set health standards."

How has the crisis impacted restaurants?

Donald Batal CEO, Ministry of Food

"The problem was approached in an aggressive way, and should have been handled differently. Clearly food safety is important, but some owners of restaurants now wished they had never opened, since they are the ones that have become the victims in this scandal. Some of the restaurants that have been implicated in this scandal have invested a lot financially in high standard health and safety procedures, without the input of the government. The problem is that the government does not have any set guidelines. One of the main aims of The Syndicate is to ensure that restaurants are given a unified set of food health procedures, in order to know how the government will approach their inspections. This is not happening now."

What are the steps that The Syndicate is taking to answer the situation?

Maya Bekaazi Board member, Syndicate of Owners of Restaurants, Cafés, Night-Clubs & Pastries in Lebanon

"Since the outbreak of this scandal last month, Tony Ramy has been following the issue closely and has made it his own. He can't be at the roundtable discussion as he is currently in a meeting lobbying deputies to ensure The Syndicate's food health guidelines, concerning the private food and beverage sector, are taken into consideration before a law is passed. It is the first time in 20 years that two ministers have taken into consideration The Syndicate's food health guidelines. The Ministry of Health took food samples from restaurants without there actually being any guidelines/law in place for the food and beverage industry to follow. In 2012 The Syndicate, with GWR and 45 other restaurants, held 40 roundtables and came up with food health guidelines based on international law models from Dubai, UK, FDA and America, which are accessible by any food and beverage outlet. It was handed to the government in 2013 but they didn't take it into consideration. There have been four or five roundtables with the government, as it is important that the private sector collaborates with them to distribute guidelines for all to follow. With GWR, The Syndicate has prepared health standards and guidelines so that the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Tourism can adopt this into a booklet for all to follow."

PARTICIPANTS

Nagi Morkos, managing partner, Hodema. 1

Charles Arbid, president, Lebanese Franchise Association. 2

Tony Boustany, country manager, Antventures. 3

Sami Hochar, owner and general manager, Catertainment. 4

Donald Batal, CEO, Ministry of Food. 5

Nabil Rizkallah, CEO, GWR Consulting. 6

Aref Saade, owner and general manager, Shogun restaurant; board member, Syndicate of Owners of Restaurants, Cafes, Night-clubs and Pastries in Lebanon. 7

Joe Njeim, operating partner, Food Kapital Holding. 8

Maya Bekaazi, board member, Syndicate of Owners of Restaurants, Cafés, Night-Clubs & Pastries in Lebanon. 9

Fawzi Ghantous, director of operations, Found'd Holding. 10

Bana Kalash Kobrosly, country manager, Boecker. 11

Samer Maroun, owner & general manager, Olio, Soto, Prune restaurants. 12

Joe Abrass, operating partner, Food Kapital Holding services. 13

Serge Maacaron, co-owner and CEO, FIG Holding. 14

Michel Bayoud, CEO, Boecker. 15

Sushi Food Safety Awareness seminar

The Syndicate of Owners of Restaurants, Cafes, Nightclubs and Pastries in Lebanon invited Lebanon's sushi and Japanese restaurant owners and executive chefs to provide them with food safety awareness; specifically for the sushi industry. The seminar started with an opening note by Aref Saadeh, a syndicate board member and veteran of the sushi industry. Khaled Nahza, gave an overview of the current relationships between The Syndicate and Ministries and the steps being taken to rectify the current food health crisis. Nabil Rizkallah, the CEO, GWR Consulting, conducted the awareness session on "safe sushi handling." GWR Consulting and Boecker will collaborate to provide their full support to the Syndicate, in order to get the industry back on track. **syndicate.beirutrestaurants.com**

