

# FOOD SAFETY

*Hotel News ME in association with Rikan General Trading, talks to a group of executive chefs to discuss overcoming food safety challenges, government incentives and food and safety measurements in the UAE*

WORDS SOPHIA SOLTANI

IN ASSOCIATION WITH



## The Hoteliers



MARCO DE WILDT, EXECUTIVE CHEF, MÖVENPICK HOTEL IBN BATTUTA GATE DUBAI



RAINER MUELLER, EXECUTIVE CHEF, AMWAJ ROTANA



GUENTER GEIGER, EXECUTIVE CHEF, THE MEYDAN HOTELS



CEDRIC D'AMBROSIO, EXECUTIVE CHEF, SOFITEL DOWNTOWN DUBAI



NEIL DAVID FOSTER, EXECUTIVE CHEF, JUMEIRAH ZABEEL SARAY

**T**his month Hotel News ME in association with Rikan General Trading, gathered a group of executive chefs at Jumeirah Zabeel Saray to discuss how the high percentage of food importation affects the quality and safety elements of running a fully functional kitchen, the main concerns importation imposes and how varying government standards across the region are significantly improving.

**With Dubai having to import over 80% of its produce, what concerns do chefs have when receiving these products from overseas?**

**Foster:** I think that generally we are paying a premium price, a price that is heightened when you work in other areas of the world you would have that market readily available on your doorstep, we don't particularly have that market here and these things are being developed such as local sourcing, but not yet in a way that supports the substantial number of guests that we need to prepare food for and be prepared to serve, the difference is that there are two sides to bringing in produce to Dubai, there is food that has landed

at the port which is generally in a container that has been traveling across the world for around six to eight weeks at any given time, which is often at a lower price and is how suppliers are combating competition, particularly with fruits and root vegetables and then there is the air freight, which you tend to pay a higher price for.

**Mueller:** You can always see the produce that is coming in from Europe or Australia at the ripeness that is needed, coming in from Europe you can see the visible difference in taste, texture and presentation, something we lack here in Dubai is the locally grown produce, but the question comes when we

state is it even safe to eat if it is essentially grown in the sand as opposed to soil, there may be ways in which manufacturers are going against nature in a sense so the questionability surrounding local produce stands at large where safety is concerned. On another note, there isn't necessarily enough safe produce that can be grown here in the UAE and Dubai to support the demand and the population here.

**Geiger:** The country of origin labeling is very important as it might otherwise mislead the consumer as to the true country of origin of the food. Another concern is whether cold chain management is done properly. As there are sev-



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eral means in which cold chain products can be transported, including refrigerated trucks and refrigerated cargo ships, it is important that items are maintained at the desired temperature. We need to be wary that every country has a different standard of treating pesticides and using chemicals. Some chemicals may not be allowed in the UAE, but other countries may be using them.

**De Wildt:** As Dubai imports over 80% of all its produce, it is important that we thoroughly assess the overall quality of the produce for any signs of damage from mishandling, contamination, or incorrect product delivery upon arrival at the hotel. We must take the transportation and delivery process into consideration and be aware that the goods may have been affected during this procedure.

As a company, we always strive to try and use as many locally sourced ingredients as possible, as we like to think that we are making a contribution towards supporting our local community and developing a more independent Dubai. The advantages that we experience by using locally sourced products is; the food is fresher, healthier and tastier with much less additives, pesticides and preservatives being used to maintain the quality and condition of the product, it supports the local economy and ecosystem and it ultimately leads to less distribution costs.

Mövenpick Hotel Ibn Battuta Gate Dubai takes enormous care and pride in

providing guests with a memorable and healthy gastronomic experience. One prime example of our establishment exercising the mindful sourcing of ingredients is acknowledged through our “Power Bites” children’s menu. The menu features a selection of inventive and colourful dishes that are fresh, nutritious, are composed of carefully selected ingredients that are locally sourced whenever possible and prove to be appealing to children of all ages.

**What are the main concerns whilst importing?**

**Mueller:** The taste is such a big concern, the produce you buy always has a different taste, take Holland, if you take a tomato from all four corners of the earth, the taste is never going to be the same as if you went to the market in Holland and hand picked the produce yourself. There is always the concern that your supplier may not take as much care as you when delivering the ingredients to your door.

**D’Ambrosio:** Quality is such a big thing, as a chef you have to take into real consideration the quality of your produce, because if the quality of your produce is low, it also means that it is most likely unsafe for consumption. For example take a pastry chef, if he wants to import some printed chocolate, arriving into the country it can be blocked, or banned, because of the e-numbers, or ingredients, so it is the way forward to find

local products but having the demand to supply these product in a safe way is going to prove tough. We don’t have enough meat or enough dairy here to sustain the growing numbers, so it is a challenge to source ingredients, but then it is also a challenge to ensure that a product that has travelled a long distance to reach your guests plates is safe for consumption, there will always be that heightened risk here in Dubai with such a high import rate.

**What is the main cause of products being sent back to a supplier, the quality or the safety element?**

**De Wildt:** In my opinion, I would regard both factors as being equally responsible for





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any goods being deemed as unacceptable and consequently being sent back to their respective suppliers. Quality issues include problems such as bruised or rotten fruit and vegetables, or fish that does not appear to look fresh with distinguishable characteristics including cloudy looking eyes or brown gills. Safety issues may include incidences such as meat arriving in vacuum packed bags, which have been exposed, to oxygen due to a tear in the plastic packaging. In this situation we would need to organise the goods to be returned to the supplier as the product has had the opportunity to be exposed to foreign and potentially harmful bacteria that could prove to be harmful to our guests.

**Geiger:** Both the quality and the safety element are equally important. For example, we cannot accept products with short ex-

piry dates such as seafood or when the labeling on the products isn't clear. Quality is also important, as you cannot compromise on the ripeness of the product. For example, even the fruits have to be at the optimum stage; if they are under ripe or over ripe, we will have to return them back to the supplier.

**Mueller:** Short expiry implements on the safety aspect, and if the supplier hasn't mentioned this but in your expert opinion and position of being a chef you know certain products have gone off because of smell and sight, so we must at every angle cover ourselves and send this type of produce back. It can also be because of damaged produce, so quality control is often an issue. We can place an order, but perhaps the supplier forgets to recheck and so this ends up creating a domino effect, so to avoid this kind

of delay or outcome, Rotana is not allowed to use any supplier that is not certified and audited, this is a fundamental aspect of building trust and a relationship with your supplier, it should also help maintain a level of certainty as to when the product arrive you begin to anticipate the quality of the produce. So your supplier has to be clean and certified.

**Foster:** The majority of the larger hotel chains are there to protect a company's name, so for us at Jumeirah we have HSE managers who audit the suppliers, I have a receiving manager, so it is this persons job to ensure the consistency with the produce, but I myself do venture down to visit the suppliers as it is so important to know where the food you serve to your guests is coming from. Half the frustration from a



Left to right:  
D'Ambrosio,  
Foster, Mueller