

Safeguarding Saudi Honey:
Exploring the Cultural, Regulatory and International Dimensions of Honey Production in Saudi Arabia

Honey has a profound historical, cultural and public health significance in Saudi Arabia. On average, Saudis consume 320 grams per person annually, which is double the global rate. Recognising the pivotal role honeybees play in the environment as pollinators, the Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture (MEWA) affords them a high degree of protection. The Kingdom's diverse flora comprises approximately 2200 flowering species, making it an important habitat for bees. Among the varieties of honey produced, Talh and Sidr are the most prevalent in Saudi Arabia.

Talh honey, which is derived from bees that feed predominantly on the nectar of acacia blossoms, has a distinct flavour profile and nutritional composition. Sidr honey, sourced from bees that eat the nectar of ziziphus plants, is a unique variant prized for its taste and alleged health benefits. These two varieties are emblematic of the Kingdom's rich heritage of honey production.

Given honey's significance in Saudi Arabia, overseeing its production and import is of paramount importance. This article outlines the Saudi Food and Drug Authority's (SFDA) efforts to regulate the honey industry, preserving its exceptional quality and upholding its cultural heritage.

Safety and Regulation

The SFDA is taking steps to regulate and ensure compliance in all food products, including honey. SFDA Standard 147 covers various aspects of honey, including types, processing methods and specific requirements for production facilities. The standard also addresses factors like enzyme content, colour, density, taste and flavour. In addition, it prohibits certain chemical treatments, and specifies limits for moisture content and acidity levels. The standards aim to ensure the quality and authenticity of available honey.

Focus: Bee Health

To safeguard the health of bees, the SFDA and MEWA are working together to regulate and monitor the presence of antibiotic residue in areas where bees collect nectar for honey production. This indicates a concern for the potential presence of antibiotics in honey, posing a risk to consumers. Through this collaboration, the SFDA and MEWA aim to implement measures to prevent or minimise such residue, ultimately ensuring the quality and safety of honey products.

Focus: Monitoring Department

The SFDA's Monitoring Department oversees an extensive national programme that gathers more than 10,000 samples from various markets annually, encompassing both locally and internationally produced products. These samples undergo rigorous testing for a range of factors, including microbial content and residue. In 2022 the department tested

approximately 200 honey samples sourced from the local market, meticulously analysing them for traces of pesticide residue and veterinary drugs, and – more importantly – for hydroxymethylfurfuraldehyde and diastase enzymes. Only a fraction of samples was found to be over the permissible limits. This dedicated effort is an ongoing commitment wherein each year the department tailors its monitoring programme to different types of food based on a thorough risk assessment, considering factors like sample size and the department's technical capabilities.

International Cooperation

To increase trade, the SFDA is helping foreign regulatory bodies authorise establishments to import goods into Saudi Arabia. This process entails granting eligibility to these bodies, allowing them to approve establishments for exporting to the Kingdom. One instance of such collaboration is evident in the SFDA's membership in the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's Codex Alimentarius, in which the SFDA actively participates in various technical committees. Within this framework, the SFDA is engaging with working groups and projects, demonstrating a commitment to fostering international cooperation, and ensuring the safety and quality of products entering the Saudi market.

Honey Imports

When honey products are shipped to Saudi Arabia as part of a food consignment, they must be accompanied by a health certificate, which serves as an assurance provided by the relevant authority in the exporting country. The certificate declares that the honey has been thoroughly checked for various factors, including the presence of antibiotic residue and the overall safety of the product. This process is overseen by the government agency responsible for such matters in the exporting country.

These requirements have been in place since 2018, and they were recently updated in 2020 to include a health certificate, indicating an ongoing commitment to ensuring the safety and quality of honey products in international trade.

Communications Strategy

The SFDA employs a comprehensive communications strategy to disseminate its regulations and standards to the public. For example, the SFDA utilises its social media platforms to keep the public informed, and conducts workshops to further enhance understanding and compliance. The SFDA notifies the public in a timely manner of any regulatory modifications or new standards. This process is conducted at a national level through the Istitlaa public consultation platform, offering individuals the opportunity to provide feedback and comments. Moreover, the SFDA engages with the World Trade Organisation, participating in the Standards and Trade Development Facility and the Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement. Through these multifaceted approaches, the SFDA maintains a robust and transparent channel of communication with international actors, fostering cooperation in food and drug regulation.

The SFDA recently released two comprehensive documents on honey – one tailored for investors and the other for consumers. The investor guide provides technical insights

covering honey's composition, characteristics, quality requirements and lab testing procedures. This equips stakeholders with the knowledge needed to make informed decisions. The consumer guide educates individuals on honey's nuances, including its benefits, potential contaminants and optimal storage practices. Together, these documents reflect the SFDA's efforts to empower both investors and consumers, promoting transparency and knowledge in the marketplace.

Conclusion and Outlook

The SFDA's meticulous regulations underscore a commitment to maintaining the highest standards for this culturally and nutritionally significant product. Beyond the Kingdom's borders, the SFDA's international initiatives serve as a catalyst for regional development, cooperation and trade. The strategy employed by the SFDA – which encompasses international collaboration, robust policy implementation, stringent quality control measures and proactive public awareness efforts – aims to position Saudi Arabia as a dependable and leading producer of high-quality honey, reinforcing its status in the global market.