



FOOD SAFETY CERTIFICATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Why Food Safety Certification Matters for South African Food Businesses

From legal compliance to customer confidence, market access and sustainable growth

Legal compliance is the foundation. A recognised food safety certification can become the gateway to new customers, stronger contracts and wider markets.

For a food business, safety is not only about producing a product that looks and tastes right. It is about having a system that consistently controls hazards, meets legal requirements, protects consumers and gives customers confidence that the business can be trusted. In South Africa, this is especially important because food businesses operate within a regulated environment while also facing increasing expectations from retailers, manufacturers, hospitality groups, exporters and multinational customers.

Regulation R638 sets baseline hygiene requirements for food premises and requires a valid Certificate of Acceptability for food premises where food is handled. Certification sits above this legal baseline: it does not replace regulatory compliance, but it provides independent assurance that a business has implemented a structured food safety management system and can demonstrate ongoing control.

Why certification is becoming a business requirement

- 1. It builds customer confidence** – A recognised certificate gives customers evidence that your food safety system has been assessed by an independent third party. This is particularly valuable when supplying large retailers, manufacturers, food-service companies or export customers that cannot personally audit every supplier in their chain.
- 2. It opens access to new markets** – Many buyers include food safety certification in supplier approval criteria. A business may be technically capable of producing an excellent product but still

be excluded from a tender, retailer listing or export opportunity because it cannot demonstrate an accepted level of food safety assurance.

3. It helps control food safety risks – Certification schemes require organisations to identify hazards, implement prerequisite programmes, establish HACCP-based controls, monitor performance, investigate nonconformities and maintain evidence. The value is not the certificate on the wall; it is the discipline created by a system that is checked, reviewed and improved.

4. It protects the brand and the consumer – Food safety incidents can lead to recalls, customer complaints, regulatory action, loss of contracts and long-term reputational damage. A robust system reduces the likelihood of failures and improves the organisation's ability to respond quickly when something goes wrong.

5. It creates accountability and consistency – Certification moves food safety away from being the responsibility of one quality person. It creates defined responsibilities for leadership, production, maintenance, procurement, warehousing, sanitation, human resources and other functions that influence food safety.

6. It supports continuous improvement – Internal audits, corrective actions, management review, verification activities, trend analysis and certification audits help the business identify weaknesses before they become major failures. This supports a culture in which food safety performance is managed rather than assumed.

Certification does not replace South African legal compliance

A certification audit is not a substitute for legal compliance. South African food businesses must first understand and meet the legislation that applies to their premises, products and activities. For many food premises, Regulation R638 of 2018 is a key starting point and includes requirements for hygiene, food handling, premises, storage, pest control, transport and the Certificate of Acceptability. Depending on the product and business activity, additional laws, regulations, standards or customer requirements may also apply.

A strong certification programme should therefore be built on a compliant legal foundation. If basic hygiene, statutory approvals or regulatory controls are weak, the organisation is likely to struggle during customer, certification and regulatory inspections alike.

Which food safety route can a business choose?

The right route depends on the size of the business, the maturity of its food safety system, its customers, its product category and the markets it wants to enter. Not every organisation needs to move directly to a full GFSI-recognised scheme. A staged journey can be more practical and cost-effective.

Route	What it means	Best suited to
FSA – Food Safety Assessment	A supplier food safety assessment/audit approach used in Southern Africa. It can be appropriate where customers require an independent food safety audit but do not yet require a GFSI-recognised certification scheme.	SMEs, local suppliers and businesses responding to customer-specific assurance requirements.
Foundation FSSC Development Program	A structured development and conformity programme designed especially for smaller and medium-sized organisations. It is aligned with Codex HACCP, GFSI Global Markets concepts and the FSSC structure, and can provide a pathway toward full FSSC 22000 certification.	Businesses that need to strengthen their systems in stages before moving to full third-party certification.
FSSC 22000 full certification	A complete food safety management system certification scheme based on ISO 22000, sector-specific prerequisite programmes and FSSC additional requirements. Version 6 remains auditable until 30 April 2027; Version 7 upgrade audits begin from 1 May 2027.	Manufacturers and other eligible food-chain organisations seeking a robust, internationally recognised and GFSI-recognised route.
BRCGS Global Standard Food Safety	A GFSI-recognised certification programme widely accepted by major brands and retailers. Issue 9 is the current published food safety standard and covers product safety, legality, authenticity, quality and operational controls.	Food manufacturers supplying retailers, branded customers, export markets or customers that specifically require BRCGS.
GFSI-recognised certification	GFSI itself does not issue a certificate. Instead, it benchmarks and recognises certification programmes. Organisations achieve “GFSI-recognised certification” by being certified to a recognised programme, such as FSSC 22000 or BRCGS, for the relevant scope and version.	Businesses whose customers require certification to a GFSI-recognised programme rather than a specific scheme.

Important note: The certificate or assessment should be selected because it matches the organisation's scope and customer requirements, not simply because it is the most well-known. A certification route that is not accepted by the target customer may add cost without creating the intended market access.

What certification readiness really requires

Organisations often underestimate the work required before the external audit. Audit readiness is not achieved by creating procedures a few weeks before the auditor arrives. The system must be implemented, understood by employees and supported by records that show it is working.

- Legal compliance review and confirmation of applicable regulatory requirements.
- Gap assessment against the selected standard, scheme or customer audit protocol.
- Food safety policy, objectives, roles and management commitment.
- HACCP team competence, product descriptions, process flow diagrams and a robust hazard analysis.
- Effective prerequisite programmes such as cleaning, pest control, maintenance, allergen management, foreign-body control, personal hygiene, waste management and supplier approval.
- Traceability, withdrawal and recall systems that can be tested and demonstrated.
- Food fraud and food defence controls where required by the chosen scheme.
- Competence and training records for employees whose work can affect food safety.
- Internal audits, corrective action management, verification and management review.
- Evidence that procedures are being followed consistently in the factory or food premises, not only on paper.

How Savvy Compliance Solution can help

Savvy Compliance Solution helps food businesses move from “we need a certificate” to “we have a working food safety system that is ready to be assessed.” Our role is to help organisations understand the requirements, close gaps, build capability and prepare for the independent audit. The final certification decision remains with the chosen independent certification or assessment body.

Certification pathway selection: We help you identify whether your current business need is better suited to an FSA audit, the Foundation FSSC Development Program, FSSC 22000, BRCGS or another customer-required route.

Gap assessments and readiness audits: We assess your existing system against the selected requirements, identify gaps, prioritise risk and build a practical action plan.

Food safety system development: We support development or improvement of procedures, HACCP documentation, prerequisite programmes, registers, monitoring systems and records that are practical for your operation.

R638 and inspection readiness: We can help organisations prepare for regulatory inspections and strengthen the legal and hygiene foundation on which certification depends.

Internal audits and mock certification audits: A structured pre-audit helps identify likely nonconformities before the external auditor arrives and gives teams experience in presenting objective evidence.

Corrective action support: Where previous audits or inspections have raised findings, we help teams move beyond quick fixes by identifying root causes and implementing sustainable corrective actions.

Accredited food safety training: Savvy Compliance Solution can provide accredited training to build the competence needed for effective implementation, including training relevant to food hygiene, HACCP and food safety management responsibilities.

Implementation coaching: We work with management and operational teams so that food safety becomes part of day-to-day behaviour rather than a documentation exercise led only by Quality.

READY FOR YOUR NEXT FOOD SAFETY AUDIT?

Savvy Compliance Solution can help you assess the gap, prepare the system, train your team and build audit confidence - from regulatory readiness to recognised certification.

PREVENT • PROTECT • PERFORM

The bottom line

For South African food businesses, certification can be much more than an audit requirement. When the right scheme is selected and properly implemented, it strengthens operational control, improves customer confidence and can unlock access to larger customers and new markets. The most successful organisations do not prepare only for the audit date - they build systems that work every day.

Whether your next step is an FSA assessment, the Foundation FSSC Development Program, FSSC 22000 full certification, BRCGS or another GFSI-recognised certification programme, preparation should start with a clear understanding of your current level, your customer expectations and the gaps that must be closed.

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